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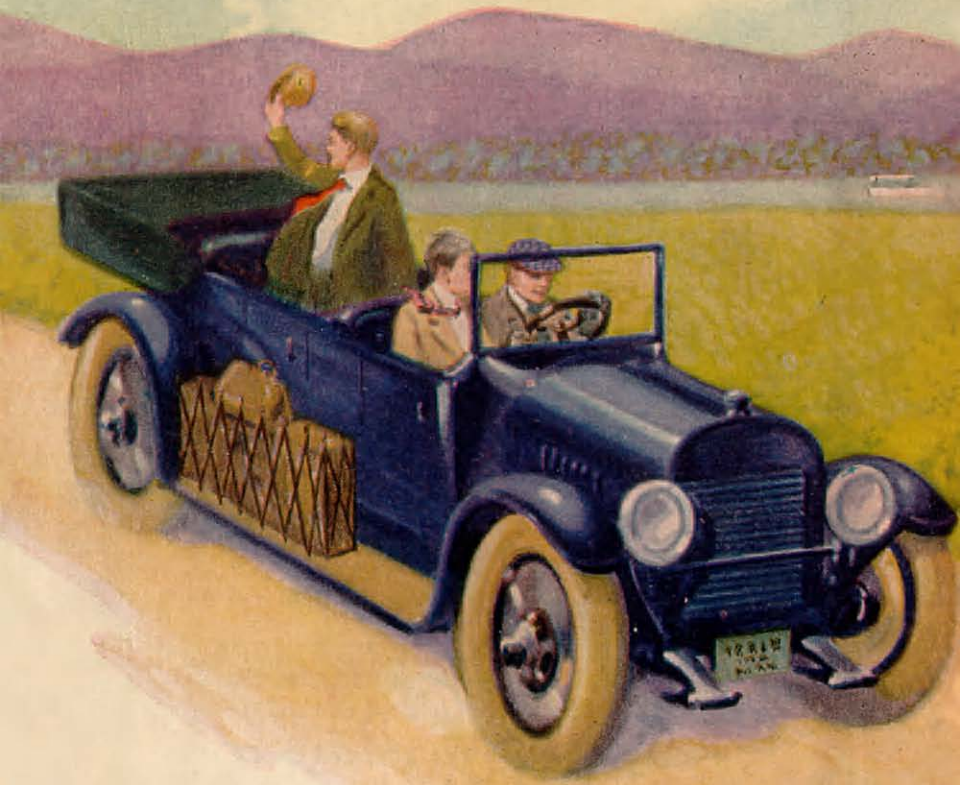

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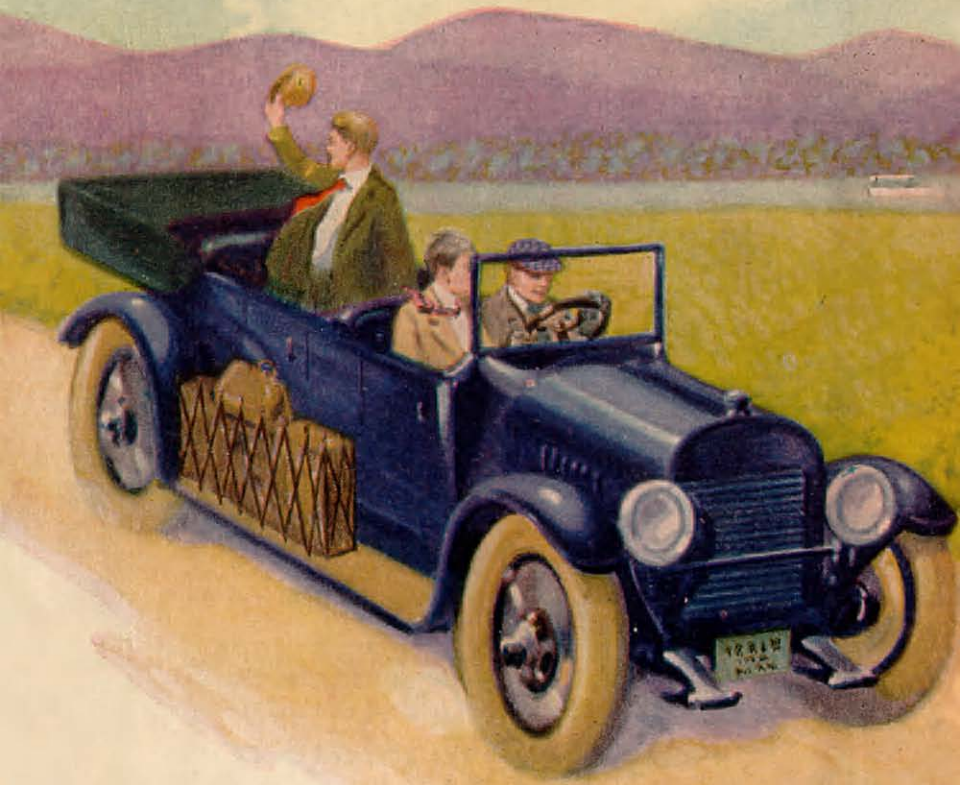

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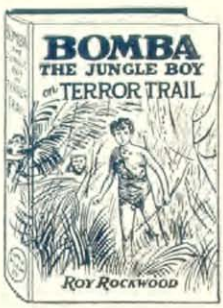

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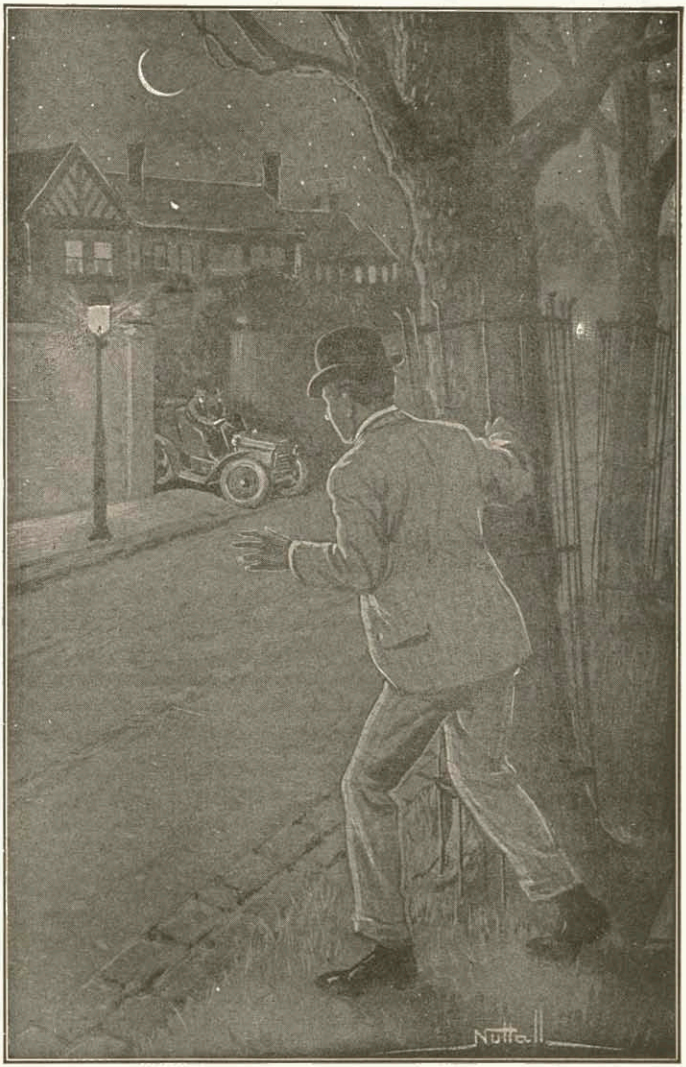

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THE MOTOR BOYS

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THE MOTOR BOYS.

CHAPTER I.

AN ENCOUNTER ON BICYCLES.

"Hi, Ned! what do you say to a little race?"

"I'm ready," called Ned Slade.

"How about you, Jerry?"

"Oh, I'm always ready," answered Jerry Hopkins, tossing aside the core of an apple he had been eating. "But how far is the race to be, Chunky?"

"To the oak tree," replied Bob Baker.

"Suits me," said Jerry. "All aboard!"

The three bicyclists rose from the grass where they had been resting in the shade of a big maple tree, after a trip of about five miles on their bicycles around the country outside of the village of Cresville, where they lived. Cresville was a pleasant town, not a great many miles from Boston.

The three boys were chums, and had been ever since they had started to school together, eight years previous. There was Bob, the son of An-

drew Baker, who was counted one of the wealthiest men in Cresville. His interests were varied, but were mainly in banks and banking institutions. Besides Bob there was in the family a daughter Susie. Bob was fourteen years old, and Susie two years younger, and Bob was so much inclined to stoutness that he was sometimes called "Chunky" by his chums.

Ned was the only child of Aaron Slade, owner of the largest department store in the town, and a well-off merchant. As for Jerry he lived with his widowed mother, and his sister Julia Hopkins, a girl whom it would do your heart good to know, she was so jolly and full of fun. The death of Mr. Hopkins, a few years previous, had left his widow with an ample income, which she devoted to the bringing up of her children. Jerry and Ned were the same age, fifteen years.

All three boys were sturdy chaps, full of life and energy. They had studied, played and fought together so long that they had come to be regarded as three inseparables by the townspeople.

"Now are you fellows ready for the word?" asked Bob, steadying his wheel in a line with the other two.

"Let her go!" called Jerry.

"Sing out, Chunky!" shouted Ned.

There was a moment of suspense, and a momentary thrill over even so slight a thing as this little sprint among the three boys. Each one meant to win.

"Go!" yelled Bob.

In an instant the wheels were started off. Three boys bounded into three saddles. Three pairs of feet began to pump the pedals desperately. A cloud of dust arose and the race was on.

It was a distance of half a mile from the maple tree, where the start was made, to the oak which Bob had designated as the winning post. The road was a good hard level stretch of macadam and the wheels fairly spun along it.

At first the boys were on even terms. Then Bob gradually drew away from Ned and Jerry. Seeing this Ned put an extra ounce or two into his pushing and he soon caught up to Bob. These two held the lead on almost a line for a few hundred feet.

Suddenly there was a whirr of wheels behind them, an excited joyous shout and, with a yell, Jerry whizzed past, and obtained such a good advantage that he kept it, until he reached the oak, where he leaped off, and cast himself down in the shade to rest.

"I didn't think you could do it, Jerry," panted

Ned, as he and Bob flashed up two seconds later. "Honest, I didn't."

"Nor I," came from Bob. "You must have been practicing lately."

"Well, I thought I ought to try and improve my wheel-work," said Jerry modestly. "I'm thinking of going in the club races that will be held soon, and I wanted to stand some sort of a show."

"I'd say you stood a pretty good one, if you ride like you did to-day," interposed Ned. "You went past us flying, and Bob and I weren't going so slow, either; were we, Bob?"

"Not exactly."

For a few minutes the boys lolled lazily in the grass, enjoying the fresh air and sunshine. Then Bob took three apples from his pocket and treated.

"Do you fellows know what I wish?" began Jerry, who had finished his light lunch first. "I wish we all had motor-cycles."

"It wouldn't be a half-bad idea," agreed Bob, after a little thought. "I'm beginning to get a little tired of this leg-work, myself. How about you, Ned?"

"I think I could use a motor-cycle if one came my way," replied Ned. "That is after I learned how to operate one, and wouldn't blow myself

and the immediate neighborhood up with gasolene."

"They're easy to run," affirmed Jerry, "and no more dangerous than a horse. The catalogue I have says so."

"That reminds me, are you two going in the bicycle races?" asked Jerry. "You know there are going to be some fine prizes."

"You mean the Cresville Athletic Club races?" asked Ned.

"Yes," replied Jerry.

"I hadn't thought much of it," said Bob. "I heard about 'em, but it takes a lot of time to train, and you have to almost starve yourself."

"How about you, Ned?"

"Well, if you and Bob go in for it, Jerry, I s'pose I might as well too. Tell us what you know about the races."

Jerry related what he had heard about the plans of the athletic club to hold an out-door meet on their grounds three weeks hence. As he had said, several valuable prizes were to be awarded, and there were many classes of handicap contests, so that the boys would have plenty of chances to enter, and stand a good show of winning one or more of the trophies.

"It sounds good," said Ned at length.

"I'm going to enter, and begin training at once," decided Chunky.

"Same here, then," came from Ned. "Have you entered yet, Jerry?"

"No, but I've begun to train some. There's plenty of time to send in your name if you want to enter. The lists are open until five days before the races."

"All right, then it's settled," exclaimed Ned, slowly rising from his comfortable berth in the grass.

The three boys mounted their wheels and started slowly homeward. They took their time, keeping close together and talking now of the coming races and again of the prospects of owning motorcycles. At the top of a long, gentle sloping hill, that led down, almost to the centre of the town, the boys put their feet on the coasters and let their wheels glide down by gravity. Soon they were going at a rapid rate, with Ned slightly in the lead.

At the foot of the hill another road crossed at right angles. By reason of a turn to this second road, and a clump of trees, any one passing along it could not be seen until he was nearly in the middle of the hill road.

Suddenly there shot from behind the clump of

trees lining the cross-road, a figure on a wheel.

"Look out!" yelled Bob and Jerry.

Ned looked up and saw, but was too late. He could not check his speed, and the only thing to do was to turn to one side, and try to avoid the other rider. Unfortunately the other rider, also seeing the danger, took the same turn as had Ned.

"There's going to be a smash!" called Jerry in excited tones.

The shock threw Ned and the other cyclist from their wheels into the dusty road. The bicycles went in one direction and the riders in another. Both boys were lying still on the highway when Bob and Jerry came running up.

"Are they killed?" asked Jerry in a trembling voice.

"No, only stunned, I guess," answered Bob, feeling of Ned's heart, and finding it beating. "Let's see who the other fellow is."

He turned the boy who had collided with Ned over.

"Noddy Nixon!" he said. "He'll be sure to say this was Ned's fault, and it may make trouble. I wish Ned had put on his brake."

Ned sat up and opened his eyes. A few seconds later Noddy Nixon did likewise.

"What happened?" gasped Ned, rubbing the dust from his eyes.

"You had a little spill, that's all," answered Bob.

"A little spill? I should say we did," snarled Noddy, who was larger and stronger than any of the three chums, and older, being about eighteen. "A nasty little spill it was, too. And all your fault, Ned Slade! Why didn't you look where you were going?"

"Why didn't you look?" asked Ned, hotly. "I turned out to avoid you, and if you'd been paying attention you wouldn't have steered right into me. It's as much your fault as it is mine."

"My leg's broke," came from Noddy. "You'll suffer for this!"

"Get up and let's see if it's broken," urged Bob, taking hold of Noddy's shoulder.

"Oh! Ouch!" screamed Noddy, who though he was strong and a bully was also a great coward in pain. "My shoulder's broken, too. I'll sue you for this, Ned Slade, after I get well, and I'll lick you, too."

"Oh, dry up!" muttered Ned, who was painfully limping toward his wheel.

When Noddy came to move he discovered that he was not as badly hurt as he had foolishly imag-

ined. He got on his feet, brushed the dirt from his clothes, and found that he could walk all right. But he scowled darkly when he saw Bob grinning at him.

"You're more scared than hurt," said Bob.

"Look here, you impudent little snob!" burst out Noddy, limping over toward the boy who was still smiling. "Don't give me any of your lip. I won't stand it. I'll knock your head off!"

"Better not try," advised Bob quietly, the smile leaving his face. "Two can play at that game."

"Yes, and so can we all of us!" broke in Jerry, who was something of a boxer. "We're sorry for what happened, Nixon," he went on, "but you needn't rub it in."

"Oh, shut-up!" cried Noddy, turning away, and picking up his wheel. "I'll get even with you for this, though," he muttered.

"Two of my spokes are broken," he went on, after an examination of his bicycle. "You'll have to pay for them, Ned Slade."

"So are two of mine, and my handle bars are bent," retorted Ned. "I guess we'll call it even, Noddy. I won't charge you for straightening the handles," and he laughed in spite of the pain of his bruises.

"You — you!" began Noddy, but rage seemed

to choke him, and with scowling face he mounted his wheel and rode slowly away. "You just wait!" he shouted back, shaking his head at the three boys.

CHAPTER II.

A MEAN PLOT.

"WELL," began Bob, when the three chums were ready to proceed on their way, Ned having been brushed off, "I'd like to have Noddy for a close friend, I don't think! Wonder what makes him so mean?"

"Born so, I s'pose," grunted Ned. "Any one else would have laughed over such an accident. He seemed to think I did it on purpose."

"He talks as though he did," ventured Jerry. "I wonder what he'll do to get square?"

"Oh something sneaking, you may depend on it," replied Bob. "That's the way with Noddy and his kind. He's nothing but a big bully. Never fights with any one but some one he's sure he can whip. I don't know's I could lick him, but I'd like to try once."

"Me too," said Ned, "after I get over being stiff."

When Jack Pender, who was a toady of Noddy Nixon, called on the latter in a sort of club-house

in Nixon's yard that night, he found the bully in no amiable frame of mind.

"What's the matter?" asked Jack.

"None of your business," snapped Nixon, lighting a cigarette.

"You needn't be so cross," whined Jack, who was used to rather shabby treatment from the bully, to whom he toadied in the hope of favors.

"I guess you'd be cross if you had the tumble I did to-day," growled Noddy.

"Somebody knock you down?" asked Pender, incautiously.

"Somebody knock me down? I'd like to see 'em try it," boasted Noddy. "No. I was out taking a spin, and that young cub of a Ned Slade tried to upset me. I got even with him, though," added Noddy, to whom telling the truth did not come natural. "I gave his wheel a twist and sent him flying. I guess he won't forget his fall in a hurry. He got worse than I did," which was not so, though Jack did not know it.

"Serves him good and right," chuckled the toady. "I can't bear Ned. He's too uppish. Thinks because his father has a little money he's better than the rest of us. And I haven't any use for his chums, Bob and Jerry."

"Same here," agreed Noddy, lighting another

cigarette. "But I'll get even with 'em. My father has as much money as any of their fathers' has. They needn't think they can down me."

"Bully for you," cried Jack, hoping to curry favor. "I'd like a chance to get even too."

"Maybe it will come before you think it will."

"What do you mean?" asked Jack in a whisper.

"Never mind," replied Noddy. "I'll tell you when the time comes."

For some time the two cronies sat and talked in the structure, which Noddy had fixed up as a resort where he might smoke cigarettes, a practice his father had forbidden him.

"Going in the club races?" asked Jack at length. "I hear there will be some fine prizes, and a little chance to make money."

"You mean on the winners?"

"Sure. I got the tips straight from one of the trainers. There'll be a pretty penny in it for us."

"It's worth looking into," decided Noddy. "But about my racing. I hadn't thought of that. I suppose I could go in."

After some further talk both Jack and Noddy decided they would enter their names for several events in the bicycle class. When they parted that night they agreed to meet the next evening to discuss details.

Not long after dusk the following night Jack and Noddy were in close consultation in "the coop."

"I hear Ned, Bob and Jerry are going to enter the races," said Jack, after a short conversation.

"Why, you're not afraid of them, are you?" asked Jack.

"I know I can beat either Ned, Bob or Jerry. The only thing is I'm not in good training and I can't spare the time. I'm faster than either of them for a short sprint," which he was. "But in a long race they might down me."

Jack did not think it wise to comment on the bully's change of ideas.

"If the races were hundred-yard dashes I wouldn't worry a bit," said Noddy. "I could win hands down. But the best race is for three miles, and that — that's rather a long distance for me. If we could fix things — "

"How fix?" inquired Jack.

"Well," proceeded Noddy boldly, "I mean to win that race. There's a first prize, worth three hundred dollars, and I want it. I'm going to get it. That's all. If I can't win by fair means — "

"I see," whispered Jack softly.

"I'm glad you do," retorted Noddy, lighting a

cigarette. "I may need your help. We must beat them, Jack. I hate them!"

Thereupon the two cronies resumed their whisperings, talking in low tones, for they were fearful of being overheard in their plotting.

Within the next few days arrangements for the races of the athletic club went rapidly on. Bob, Ned and Jerry entered their names, Ned finding that he had no permanent lameness from his "spill." Noddy and Jack also had their names entered. Then all the boys, including many others who had decided to try for the prizes, began training.

There were several events on the race card. There were ten and five mile races, but none of the boys thought of trying for them. There were also short distance trys for girls, and also a three mile race, for boys and young men between fourteen and nineteen years of age. The first prize was a three hundred dollar piano, or any other article of that value, and the second and third prizes were of one hundred and fifty and one hundred dollars value respectively. Of course each of our heroes hoped to win big prizes, and there was a keen but friendly rivalry among them.

CHAPTER III.

THE DAY OF THE RACES.

At last came the day for the races. It was early in July, and the weather though warm, was not oppressive. Early in the morning a big crowd started out toward the grounds of the Cresville Athletic Club, which were about a mile outside of the town proper.

Ned, Bob and Jerry reached the track about ten o'clock, and found it pretty well occupied.

"It will give us good practice in wheeling in a crowd," observed Jerry as he stripped off his sweater and, in regular racing costume, began to make the circuits.

His two friends soon followed his example. A little later Noddy and Jack arrived. The two cronies kept to themselves and spoke no word to our three heroes.

About noon-time there was a general stopping and all the contestants who were warming up went to get something to eat. Under Jerry's advice Ned and Bob ate and drank sparingly.

The races were to begin at two o'clock. Long before that hour most of the best seats were filled, and there was a crowd on the way to the athletic grounds that would tax the capacity of the bleachers.

About half-past one o'clock a rather gaunt individual might have been seen making his way toward the athletic grounds. He wore a pair of patched trousers and a green coat, with a red patch on either elbow.

"Hi there!" called some boys. "Look at the hobo going to enter the races."

"Oh, I may be a hobo, but I'm not a dodo; put that in your pipe and smoke it till night. That ain't a good rhyme, but it'll do this time," recited the man in a sing-song tone.

"Ha! Ha! Isn't he funny!" laughed some small boys.

Hearing the sound of laughter Ned, Bob and Jerry, who were walking together in the fields, a short distance away from the athletic grounds, came over.

"Why it's Old Pete!" cried Bob. "Hello Pete! I say, Old Pete Bumps!" he called, waving his hand to the man with a green coat and a red patch on either elbow.

"Oh, I say, is that you, why how do you do?"

said Mr., otherwise Old Pete Bumps, who was a general man of all work about Mr. Baker's place. He did everything from feeding the chickens to taking out the ashes.

"Hello Pete!" called Jerry and Ned in chorus. "What did you come for? Are you going to race?"

"Am I going to race? Well not in this place," replied Pete gravely. "I came to watch over you boys. Be a sort of general overseer as it were. Look after the wheels and see that they get full meals," he added without a smile.

From which it may be inferred that Mr. Bumps was something of a character.

Indeed at one time he had been a well educated man. But an injury to his head, caused by a fall, and a number of misfortunes, had displaced him from a life of comparative wealth, and had made him a sort of foolish, though very loving, elderly man. Mr. Baker had taken pity on him and made a place for him, for which poor Old Pete Bumps, as he called himself, was very grateful. He was very fond of children, especially boys, and was always looking after the interests of Bob and his chums.

"Now Pete can look after our wheels," said Bob. "I was wondering who we could leave in

charge between the heats, and while we were dressing. He'll be the very one."

"Surely will I, e'en though I die," said Pete gravely, for he had a habit of making extemporaneous rhymes on all occasions, which jingles sometimes fitted and sometimes did not.

"All right, Pete," said Bob. "Come on over here," and he led the hired man to where the boys had left their three wheels in charge of a lad of their acquaintance, who had agreed to stand guard at the rate of five cents a half hour. Pete gravely squatted down on the grass near the bicycles.

Relieved of the responsibility of guarding their mounts, the trio of lads wandered about the grounds of the club. There was much bustle and excitement. New riders were constantly arriving and going out on the track to warm up. Hundreds of spectators were coming afoot, or in carriages or automobiles. Flags waved gaily in the wind, and the whole scene was a spirited one. A bevy of girls coming up the road that led to the entrance of the grounds attracted the attention of our three heroes.

"Looks like my sister Susie with that red dress on," said Bob.

"And that seems to be Julia, in that green hat," observed Jerry. "Yes, that's her," he went on.

"I can tell by her laugh," he added, as a merry peal floated over the green field.

"Who are the girls with them?" asked Ned, who had no sisters, but who was as fond of girls as they were of him.

"There's Mollie Horton, who lives near me," said Ned. "She's jolly enough. And Alice Vines. I don't know who the other one is."

"That's Helen Gale," put in Bob. "I know her. She made that silk flag with our foot-ball colors on last year for me."

"Good for her!" exclaimed Ned.

The girls soon came up, and there was merry talk for a little while. The boys wanted to take the girls over and buy some ice-cream sodas.

"We haven't time," objected Julia. "We want to get our seats before the races begin. We don't want to miss a one."

"You won't miss anything," assured Ned.

"Oh but we might," interposed Alice. "And it is not every day we can come to such a big event as this. If you boys want to get the sodas afterward —"

"Of course we will," broke in Jerry. And so they agreed to treat the girls after the races.

Not long after Pete had been left in charge of the cycles a man, wearing a slouch hat, who had

been but a few minutes before in close consultation with Jack Pender, shuffled up to where Pete was lying in the grass.

"Arternoon, mate," said the roughly dressed man in a growling voice.

"How do you do, I'm glad to see you," replied Pete, in his sweetest tones.

"What yer givin' us?" demanded the stranger.

"Me? I gave you nothing, sir," replied Pete.

"Come off your high perch then, an' talk United States," went on the stranger gruffly. "My name's Bill Berry, what's yours?"

"My name's Pete Bumps, I'm full of humps," recited Pete gravely.

"You look it," commented Bill Berry. "But I say, mate," he went on, "how would you like to go off and get a good smoke? Come, I'll pay for it?"

"I'd like it first rate, but I must stay here quite late," said Pete.

"Why so? Oh, I don't know," mocked Bill, falling into the eccentric mood of his companion.

"To guard the wheels against the steals," replied Pete.

"Don't let that worry you," went on Bill, eagerly. "I'll stay here. You go get yourself some-

thing to smoke, and take your time. I'll stand guard while you're away."

If there was one thing more than another that Old Pete liked, it was to smoke. Usually he had to forego this pleasure because of lack of funds. Now here was a chance to indulge. So, after receiving twenty-five cents from Bill Berry, Pete started over to the grand stand, near which was a booth where cigars and refreshments were sold.

Bill looked narrowly about as soon as Pete was out of sight. There were plenty of people around him, but no one seemed to be noticing what he was doing. Quickly Bill pulled a wrench from his pocket and used it on each of the three bicycles. Then he brought out a stick of something black.

"This graphite is well doctored," he muttered. "I guess it won't be healthy for the chains."

He rubbed a liberal supply on the chain of each wheel, and also on the sprockets. Then he rapidly opened the tool bags on each machine, took out the graphite he found there, and substituted some of his own.

"I guess that will do the trick," he said softly. "And I guess I've earned my two dollars, Jack Pender."

He hurried off, mingled with the crowd, and a little later was in conversation with Jack Pender.

A little later Pete came hurrying back. He was smoking a cheap cigar, and his pockets bulged with others.

"Here you go, Bill, now smoke with a will," began Pete, when he drew near where he had left his new friend in charge of the boys' bicycles. "Why, he's gone," he went on, seeing the deserted mounts. "Wonder where he went?" However, he did not give much thought to it, and went on smoking happily.

"Wheels all right?" asked Ned a few minutes after, as he, Jerry and Bob came up.

"Right as a fiddle, come high-diddle," recited Pete.

"Hark! What' that?" asked Chunky suddenly. "Sounds like an announcement."

The three boys ran nearer the grand stand where the official announcer stood. The man was using a small megaphone and went on to say that there had been a slight change in the program, and that the race for those who had never been in a contest before would be the first number instead of the third.

"Great Scott, Chunky! That'll mean you'll have to hustle for all you're worth!" cried Jerry. "Here, get your wheel out, strip off your sweater

and get around to the track entrance and have your number pinned on."

Jerry grabbed up his chum's wheel, while Ned assisted the lad in pulling his sweater over his head. Then, cautioning Pete to keep a strict look-out, the three boys ran with Bob to the track entrance.

They were only just in time, and found a lot of other contestants ahead of them. Bob received his number, and then, for the first time, thought of his wheel.

"Just spin it for me, to see if it don't need a drop more of oil," Bob asked Jerry. "My hands shake so I can't undo the tool bag."

Obligingly Jerry spun the wheels. The rubber-tired circle went around swiftly for several turns, and then came a sudden slowing down.

"That's funny," remarked Bob. "I had that all adjusted this noon."

Jerry bent down and looked at the bearings.

"The cones have been tightened," he announced. "Why I can feel the friction," and he moved the front wheel slowly with his hands.

"Try the back wheel!" urged Ned.

Holding that clear of the ground Jerry spun it by placing his foot on the pedal. There was a woeful squeak, and, after a few revolutions that wheel, too, slowed down. Jerry rubbed his finger

over the sprocket chain. It came away black from the graphite, but mingled with the blackness were many shining specks.

Just then there came the crack of a revolver.

"That means three minutes to the start," cried Bob. "What will I do? I can't fix the wheel in that time!"

"Some one's put iron filings in the graphite," announced Jerry, rubbing the stuff between his fingers. "There's trickery here!"

"And I'll lose the race!" cried Bob. "I know I have a good chance of winning!"

"Let me get my wheel!" exclaimed Ned.

"It wouldn't do any good," interposed Jerry. "We haven't time to run after them. Besides, the chances are our wheels are doctored too."

"All ready, boys!" warned the starter. "Minute and a half more before the final gun!"

"I might as well quit," cried Bob.

"Don't you do it!" said some one suddenly at his side. "Here, you take my wheel. It's a racer, and I've just oiled it."

As he spoke a boy, of about thirteen years, who had a slight acquaintance with our three heroes, shoved a handsome new wheel over toward Bob.

"Oh, thank you, Sam Morton," said Bob. "But don't you want it yourself?"

"Not a bit," said Sam. "I'm not going to race. Take the wheel."

"All right, I will," assented Bob. "And I'll square things with you afterward, Sam. Some one has doctored mine. I—"

But Bob did not have time to say any more.

"Half a minute!" warned the starter.

"Get on the track!" cried Jerry.

"Line up! Do your best and win!" counseled Ned.

"I will!" shouted back Bob, and the next instant he was lined up with the others, waiting for the pistol shot that would start them off.

"Crack!"

A little puff of smoke, a sliver of flame, and a slight report. Then the whirr of rubber tires on the track sounded like the wind rushing through the trees.

The race, while it was of much interest to the contestants and their friends, was not very important to the general public. It was only a mile sprint and there were ten starters.

Bob's heart beat wildly at first and his wheel wobbled from side to side. Then the fever of fear left him. He saw that he was not being left behind and he picked up courage. He shut his teeth tightly, took a long breath, and let out a

burst of speed that carried him to within three of the leader.

There was a cheer at this, which gave him new courage, and he struggled harder and harder. Gradually he passed two of those ahead of him. There now remained but one lad between himself and the lead. He gave one quick glance.

"It's Jack Pender," he thought. "I know he's been in races before. But I'm going to beat him."

Once more Bob clenched his teeth and let out another burst of speed. But he had a good rider to contend against. Jack, looking behind and seeing the boy he hated, redoubled his efforts.

The race was half done. Already several who had no chance had dropped out. The struggle was between Bob and Jack. Bob could hear the band playing, as if it was a mile away. He drew one long breath, threw into his leg muscles another ounce of strength and then, with an effort that surprised even himself he found that he was on even terms with Jack.

"Confound you! What are you trying to do, beat me?" snapped Jack.

"That's what I am."

"Well, you're not going to!"

Jack gave his wheel a sudden turn. His inten-

tion was to upset Bob. But the latter was too quick for him.

"Foul! Foul!" cried several who had seen the attempt.

The two passed the post set an eight of a mile from the finish, neck and neck. Bob could see that Jack was almost winded. As for Bob, though in distress he still had some reserve strength.

Then, with a last final burst of speed, with a frenzied effort that sent the blood singing to his head, Bob passed his rival, and came under the tape a winner by two good lengths.

"Hurrah!" cried thousands.

"Hurrah!" cried Ned and Jerry, though Bob could not hear them.

And Bob, almost tumbling from his wheel, felt happier than he ever had in his life before. He had won the race.

He could see Jack Pender scowling at him, but he did not mind that.

"I didn't know you were an amateur, Jack," Bob heard one of the toady's friends address him.

"I'm not any more," laughed Jack. "That was my last amateur race. I'm going in with the professionals on the next race, and I'm going to win."

"You are if we let you," was the response.

CHAPTER IV.

THE THREE MILE RACE.

As soon as Ned and Jerry had congratulated Bob, which they did with glad hearts, they hurried from where they had watched him winning the race, to the place where Old Pete had been left in charge of the wheels.

"The chances are we'll find them doctored," said Jerry. "Only we'll have an opportunity to fix them before our race, if they aren't too badly tampered with."

Bob returned the wheel he had won on to its owner, Sam Morton, and offered to share the prize with him, but Sam would not hear of it.

"I was only too glad to help you out," he said. "You ought to make a complaint to the officers of the club about your wheel."

"Wait until I find out who monkeyed with it," said Bob, "and I'll take care of him without any complaint," and he doubled up his fist suggestively.

The three chums, Bob carrying his own disabled

wheel, hurried to where Pete was. They found that worthy consuming his third cheap cigar, evidently in great enjoyment.

Jerry and Ned made a hasty examination of their bicycles, and quickly discovered something wrong with each.

"The same scoundrel that tampered with Bob's was at ours," said Ned. "Bearings tightened and steel filings in the graphite. Who was it, I wonder?"

"Say, Pete," began Bob, "did any one touch our wheels while we were away?"

"Not a one, my dear son," recited Pete with a wise air.

"Here Pete, you drop that poetry and attend to business," said Bob, somewhat sternly. "Were you here every minute since we left?"

"I went over to get some cigars."

"And who stayed with the wheels while you were away?"

"Friend of mine. Bill Berry, fat as a cherry," replied Pete, unable to resist the temptation to make a rhyme.

"Look here —" started in Bob, fiercely, "I'll have to —"

"That explains it," broke in Jerry.

"Explains what?" asked Bob.

"Explains who had a hand in this," went on Jerry. "You know Bill, who isn't any too good a character about town, and Jack Pender have been quite thick of late. Two or three times I've caught them whispering together down to the post office."

"Well, what of it?"

"This much. You know what a sneak Jack is, always toadying around that bully Nixon. Well, Nixon threatened to get even with all of us on account of that little spill he and Ned had. This is how he's done it. He's got Jack to do his dirty work, and Jack has hired Bill to doctor our wheels.

"While we were away Bill comes over here, bribes poor old Pete with the offer of something to smoke to leave him in charge for a little while, and does the trick. Didn't Bill give you something to smoke?" demanded Jerry.

"He give me the money, now ain't that funny," sang Pete, without a thought of the consequences of his act.

"That's just it," agreed Ned and Bob, and they complimented Jerry on his shrewdness.

"Oh, that was easy enough to figure out," said the lad. "The question is, can we get our wheels in shape for the race? We've got about half an hour."

The boys lost no more time in idle regrets. Tool bags were opened, and with wrenches and screw drivers the three set to work adjusting the bearings properly. Though this was a somewhat delicate task they succeeded in about ten minutes.

"Now to clean the chains," said Bob. "That graphite must all come off."

"Kerosene oil is the best," suggested Jerry. "Hurrah!" he shouted. "This will do!" and he set off on the run.

In a few seconds he reached a lantern that was fastened on a pole, and used, at night, to illuminate the driveway to the club-house. "This is just what we needed," he said. "We'll borrow a little kerosene from the lamp."

The tin reservoir held more than was needed, and in another minute each boy was busy cleaning his chain.

"Now to put some fresh graphite on, and we'll be in good shape," cried Ned, in high glee over the successful outcome of the plan.

Jerry was the first to take his stick of lubricant from his tool bag. As he did so he gave a start. Then he rubbed some of the black material between his thumb and finger.

"I thought so!" he exclaimed.

"Doctored?" inquired Ned and Jerry nodded.

"Iron or steel filings," he said. "Lucky there is plenty of graphite to be had, or we'd be stuck."

It did not take long to borrow from other cyclists some of the stuff, and the chains were soon lubricated. The boys still had five minutes before their race would be called. They spent the time in resting from their hustling labors. They had fixed things just in time

In the meantime Noddy had been rather busy about the track. He prided himself on being a sport and was seeking some one who would lay wagers with him. He made several on various events, profiting by what Jack Pender said were sure tips.

"I wonder if we can't bet something on this race we're in?" asked Noddy of his toady.

"I don't see why not," assented Jack. "I think you have a good chance of winning, with those three young cubs out."

So Noddy busied himself, putting up what was a large sum even for a youth whose father kept him liberally supplied with pocket money. As a matter of fact Noddy went so deep into the betting that he had to lay considerable of the money on "wind." That is he did not have in his pocket the money he would have to pay if he lost. But then he did not think of losing.

His last wager, laid just before the time of the three mile race, was with Paul Banner. "Polly," the boys called him, for young Banner aspired to be what, a few years ago, was called a dude. He was fond of dressing in the height of fashion, and liked to be thought a sport. He had a small income, did not work, and spent most of his time at the athletic club.

"I'll give you odds of two to one against the favorite in this race," said Noddy to Paul.

"And who's the favorite?" asked Paul.

"Jerry Hopkins," replied Noddy. "Come, what do you say? Two to one he doesn't win."

"You're on. For how much?"

"I'll lay you one hundred dollars to fifty dollars," said Noddy.

"Done." assented Paul, and he made a memorandum of the wager.

At last, after several events had been run off, during which our heroes had been busy undoing the mischief worked to their wheels, the time came for the race that meant so much to them. The announcer gave the word. Ned, Bob and Jerry hastened around to the track entrance. Noddy and Jack, with their wheels, were a few seconds behind them.

"Well, they're on hand, I see," whispered Noddy.

"Yes, they'll start, and that will be about all," replied Jack, with a meaning smile.

For a few minutes there was considerable work getting the dozen riders correctly placed. Finally they were all lined up on the white mark, and the starter raised his revolver.

"Bang!"

Off in the air lazily floated a little puff of smoke. Then the cyclists were off like the wind. My! how they did go!

Noddy Nixon, who, to give him the credit he deserved, was not a bad sprinter, was in the lead. He was pedaling at top speed, for he knew only by acquiring a big lead could he hope to win.

There was an excited shout from the spectators as they saw the start of the race, and realized that the favorite was left in the lurch. But if Jerry was disconcerted, or if either Ned or Bob was, not one of them showed it. After a few seconds Noddy glanced back. He was surprised to see Jerry rather closer to him than he hoped to find him.

"I thought you said the wheels would lag behind," said Noddy to Jack, who was riding furiously beside him.

"They must have discovered the trick and fixed things up," panted Jack.

But there was no time to talk. It was to be a race to the finish.

"I'll fix them, though," muttered Jack, letting up on his speed, which had kept him beside Noddy, and dropping back a little to the rear.

Aside from the three chums, and Noddy and Jack, there was no interest in the race, for the other seven contestants were hopelessly in the rear. Bob and Ned were on even terms, with Jerry somewhat ahead of them.

"Go on, Jerry!" called Ned. "Beat the big bully!"

"Don't either of you fellows drop out!" pleaded Jerry. "Try to win. You've as good a chance as I."

And then Jerry gave his attention to the task before him. It was no light one. However, he, as did the other two boys, felt the bicycles to be in good order in spite of the attempts at foul play. They were all riding well.

Noddy's advantage in age, his better muscular development, gave him a big lead, however, and for the first mile the gap between him and Jerry was scarcely shortened. Jack still hung on to his

comrade's rear, ready to play another dastardly trick when opportunity offered.

During the second mile it was plain to all that Noddy was petering out. His head bent lower over the handle bars, and foam, like white cotton, could be seen on his lips.

"I'm almost all in!" he gasped to Jack.

"Keep up a little longer!" entreated Jack. "You'll win! Why, you've got to win!"

And, to save himself in more ways than one, Noddy felt he must succeed. But how to do it was the question. His heart was beating like a trip-hammer, and his head felt as if it would burst.

He tried to develop another burst of speed, but, as he had said, he was "all in." Slowly he felt, rather than saw, Jerry creeping up on him. He knew that Jack was between him and his rival, however, and he hoped something might happen.

The crowd on the bleachers and on the grand stand nearly went wild as they looked at the most exciting race so far that day. The favorite was slowly but surely creeping up on the leader, and crowding him.

"Go on Jerry!" cried hundreds who wanted to see the plucky lad win. "Go on! Go on!"

"Peg away, Noddy!" shouted one or two of the bully's friends, who had, thanks to his tips or

those of Jack, put their money up on him. "Keep going!"

But it was no use. The gap between Jerry and Noddy lessened. Ned and Bob were close behind Jerry, and stood excellent chances of being at least third and fourth. But there was Jack to be reckoned with as well as Noddy, and Jerry knew this. He felt he must keep clear of Jack, for he had seen the attempted foul when Bob was racing.

Then, with a wildly beating heart, Jerry decided that the time had come to make his final sprint. He had just sta ted on the last half mile. He grasped the handle bars with a firmer grip, shut his teeth hard and took a long breath. The burst of speed he then let out amazed and delighted the audience. There were wild cheers.

Noddy looked back in despair. He saw that Jerry and Jack were on even terms. Then something happened. The something that Jack had promised to have up his sleeve. With a quick motion he sent his wheel, ever so little over toward Jerry. The act was hardly noticeable on the stand.

"Keep off!" cried Jerry, seeing what Jack had in mind. "Do you want to have an upset?"

"You never mind me!" snarled Jack. "I'll do as I please!"

Again he gave his wheel a twist. He was now

riding dangerously close to Jerry. Noddy was barely a length ahead. There was a quarter of a mile to go.

"Keep back, do you hear!" yelled Jerry.

"Keep back yourself!" retorted Jack.

Then Jack deliberately fouled Jerry. He sent his front wheel against that of his rival, intending to cause an upset. But he reckoned without his host. Bob, who had, by a sudden sprint, approached nearer to Jerry than Ned, saw what was up. Without an instant's hesitation Bob sent his wheel crashing full into Jack's from the rear, and, amid a roar of surprise and terror from the spectators, the two boys went down in a heap on the track.

"He's killed. They're killed!" cried scores.

Jerry, with grim determination in his eyes, rode on, never looking back. Noddy cast a frightened glance over his shoulder, and, when he saw what had happened his heart grew faint. He nearly lost control of his wheel. The little swerve he gave it was fatal to him.

Like a flash Jerry dashed in, took the pole, and with a burst of speed, that set the excited spectators into cheer after cheer, Jerry passed Noddy, and won by a good five lengths.

"Jerry wins! The favorite wins!" shrieked the assemblage.

Though Bob was out of the race, by his own act of self-sacrifice in saving Jerry, Ned had managed, by clever riding to escape the spill. He saw his chance when Noddy looked back, and, with a fierce effort passed the bully and came in a good second.

Even the privilege of being third was denied Noddy. He lost control of his wheel before he could cross the finish line, and one of the stragglers in the race, who had been merely hanging on the tail end, sprinted up and came in third, so that, for all their plans, Noddy and his toady came to grief.

There were congratulations after congratulations for Ned and Jerry. The boys blushed almost like girls as they received the praises that sounded in their ears. There was some talk of the spill, but when it was seen that neither Jack nor Bob was hurt there was no further alarm. At first Jack sputtered and threatened to complain that he was deliberately run down.

"Go ahead," said Bob coolly. "I saw what you tried to do to Jerry, and I know something about Bill Berry."

At that Jack and his bully friend sneaked off

without a word. They felt that it needed but a few words on the part of the three chums to get them into trouble, and they were glad enough to escape as easily as they did.

"I appreciate what you did, Chunky," said Jerry. "You practically won the race for me, and you had a good chance yourself.

"I hadn't a chance in the world with you in it," replied Bob. "Besides I won my race, so what did I want with another? I just had to run him down to save you. I'm glad I did."

"I won't forget it," exclaimed Jerry, warmly, as he grasped his chum's hand heartily.

And then the three boys, each one of whom had won a valuable prize that day, gathered up their wheels and belongings and prepared to start for home.

CHAPTER V.

A DEMAND FOR MONEY.

PROBABLY there was no more disgusted person at the races that day than Noddy Nixon. He was mad at himself, at Jack, and more than angry at Bob, Ned and Jerry. He felt very bitter in his heart toward them, though it was all his own fault. Another matter that troubled him was the money he had lost on bets.

"I'm in a deep hole," he muttered as he left the athletc grounds, "and how to get out I don't know."

For few of the tips that Jack had given proved good ones, and Noddy had lost in all about two hundred dollars. This was more money than he had possessed in some time, though an indulgent father kept him well supplied.

"Where's my father?" asked Noddy in surly tones as the maid answered his ring at the handsome house on the hill where the Nixon family lived.

"In his study, Mr. Noddy," answered the girl.

"Now to beard the lion in his den," whispered the young man to himself.

In answer to Noddy's knock — rather a timid, hesitating sort of a knock, and not in keeping with the bully's usual bluster — Mr. Nixon bade his son enter.

"How are you, Noddy?" asked Mr. Nixon, who was fond of the young man, in spite of his bad manners at times.

"Pretty fair," was the answer.

"Did you go to the races? Of course you must have, to judge by your costume."

"Yes, I went," replied Noddy. "I rode in one, just as a sort of practice. I didn't try to win. I only wanted to get in form. But say, father," he went on rapidly, "I need some money."

"Money!" exclaimed Mr. Nixon, laying aside the book he had been reading, and looking over the tops of his spectacles. "Money? Why do you know how much you have had in the last month?"

"Not so much," replied Noddy.

For answer Mr. Nixon rapidly turned over the pages of a memorandum book. When he came to a certain page he stopped and began adding up some figures.

"The total, since the middle of last month,

when I began keeping the account, to the present time, which is just about four weeks of time, is three hundred and seventy-five dollars," said Mr. Nixon.

"I had no idea it was so much," muttered Noddy.

"And now you want more?"

"I must have about two hundred dollars, father."

"Two hundred dollars! Great Scott, young man! do you think money grows on trees? What do you want with two hundred dollars? Are you going to start in business?"

"I need it to pay a few debts with," murmured Noddy.

"I'm sorry," said Mr. Nixon, closing the book, "but I can't let you have any more money now."

"But father, I simply must have it."

"You'll not get it from me, young man. I'm tired of handing you over money to waste on foolishness."

"Well, I'm going to have that money," retorted Noddy, speaking in an excited tone.

"Look here, young man," answered his father, "don't let me hear you speak to me again like that. Remember you are not of age, and until you are you are under my control. Remember also

that you are not too big to be whipped. I am inclined to think that would be a good thing for you."

"I'd like to see any one try it," retorted Noddy impudently.

"Leave the room! Leave the room, sir!" exclaimed Mr. Nixon, rising to his feet, his face white with anger. "I do not want to lose my temper, and act hastily. Leave the room at once," and he pointed to the door.

Noddy, with a sullen and hateful glance at his parent, passed through the portal. He slammed the door behind him, giving vent to the anger that raged within him. After the young man was gone Mr. Nixon sank down in a chair. He was trembling, and tears stood in his eyes.

"To think that my oldest son should be so thoughtless of the respect due me," he sighed. "I wish he was better. Perhaps if he had had to work as hard as I did to make my fortune he would not be so wasteful. But I simply can not let him spend any more money at present. It is for his own good, but he can't seem to see it. Ah me! I wish he was a better son."

Noddy went to his room, put on another suit after doffing his bicycle clothes, and then ordered one of the maids to get him something to eat. After a hasty meal he left the house.

"I wonder if I couldn't borrow some money from Tom Judson," mused Noddy, as he reached the centre of the town, and proceeded along the streets filled with people coming home from work. "He must be at the mill office yet. I'll try, any how."

Tom, the son of Amos Judson, who owned a large iron mill in Cresville, was a young man whose acquaintance Noddy had made some time before. Ordinarily Tom was well supplied with money.

Noddy found Tom in the mill office. It was about closing time.

"Hello, Tom!" greeted Noddy.

"Hello, yourself!" responded Tom, genially.

"Tom," went on Noddy rapidly, seeing there was no one within hearing, "can you lend me three hundred dollars? I need it to pay a bill with in a hurry, and I haven't time to go home. The governor would let me have it for the asking. I'll pay you back in a couple of days."

For answer Tom slowly turned one pocket after another inside out.

"Dead broke!" he laughed. "Just paid my board bill and I can't get any cash until Saturday night. Sorry."

"So am I," joined in Noddy.

"If you want to crack the safe there," went on

Tom, pointing to an old-fashioned one that stood in a corner, "you could get three hundred dollars, and more. I saw dad put one thousand dollars in bills in there a while ago. Some people paid their debts late this afternoon, and he didn't want to go to the bank so near closing time. But I guess you don't want to crack a safe, do you, Noddy?"

"No," replied Noddy, with an uneasy laugh, as he left the mill office.

"Good night," called Tom, as he proceeded to put his books away. Then, seeing that the safe was closed, and locking the office door, he went home.

"Everything fails me," muttered Noddy. "But I simply must raise the cash — somehow. I wonder — "

But he hardly dared whisper even to himself the thought that came into his mind.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE CLUB HOUSE.

FOLLOWING the last of the races at the athletic grounds it was announced that the Cresville Club would tender, that night, a reception to all participants and their friends. There was to be a little entertainment and refreshments would be served. The prizes would also be awarded.

Bob and his sister Susie were going, Ned would be there and Jerry Hopkins had promised to take Julia. Besides it was expected that a number of boys and girls, friends of the three chums, would be present.

When Bob, Ned and Jerry, with the two girls, reached the club house that evening, they found a big crowd already there.

"Oh, there's Alice Vines and Helen Gale!" exclaimed Susie, leaving her brother and running over to where the girls stood.

"Yes, and there's Mollie Horton!" exclaimed Julia. "I'm real glad she came," and Julia ran from her brother and joined Mollie.

"Well, it looks as if we'd have to paddle our own canoes," remarked Jerry, with a laugh. "Deserted the first thing, after the glorious victories we won, too."

"Let's pretend we don't want to talk to them," suggested Ned. "That's the surest way to bring the girls around," which holds true of old as well as young girls, it may be said.

"Come down stairs and I'll treat you all to ice-cream," invited Jerry.

The boys were hurrying away, not looking in the direction of the girls, when there was a flurry of skirts and a miniature cyclone descended about the lads.

"What's that I heard about ice-cream?" asked Julia, with a laugh, as she ran up and grasped her brother by the arm.

"Did you hear anything?" asked Jerry, in an innocent tone.

"Yes, and I happen to have some sort of a vague recollection about a promise of ice-cream sodas made by some one this afternoon," went on the girl, laughing. "Do you boys recall anything about that?"

"I guess the joke is on us, boys," said Bob. "Come along, girls, you shall have the ice-cream."

It was a jolly little party that gathered about

the ice-cream tables. They had almost finished one plate each, when a boy with light hair, that never seemed to be combed, and blue eyes that twinkled like two stars and a mouth that always seemed to be open, either while he was talking or laughing, came up.

"Hello girls! Hello fellows!" he exclaimed rapidly, and talking by jerks. "Fine night — big crowd — lots of people — have some more cream?"

"Easy, easy," pleaded Jerry. "You talk like a house afire, Andy Rush."

"Rush by name — Rush by nature," spluttered Andy. "Come, what is it? Ice-cream — candy cake — lemonade — pick the winner!"

"Well, I guess the girls wouldnt' object to some more cream," spoke Bob. "As for me, ice-cream sort of palls after one big plate. I'll have some lemonade."

Andy joined the little party, and added to the fun. He never seemed to stop talking, and he didn't seem to care whether any one listened.

"Prizes going to be given out," cried Andy, presently, hurrying up stairs.

This was a signal for a general breaking up of the little party. As each of the three chums came in for a prize they had to be near the platform,

where Mr. Wakefield, the athletic instructor of the club, gave out the trophies.

There was quite a jam of people in the main room of the club, where seats had been placed to accommodate the assemblage. The boys found it rather difficult to get near the platform, but finally succeeded.

Bob's name was the first called. He blushed as he went forward to receive a fine diamond scarf pin that was the first prize in the amateur race class.

After several other trophies had been given out came the turn of Jerry to go forward and get the first prize for the three mile race. It was announced that the winner of this could have his choice of any article to the value of three hundred dollars. The money could not be given, as that would put the winner in the professional class, Mr. Wakefield said.

"We thought of giving a three hundred dollar piano as the first trophy," said Mr. Wakefield, "but there is no obligation to take that, as it is not purchased. Now, Jerry, what would you like?"

"If it can be bought for that amount of money I'll have a motor-cycle," replied Jerry after a moment's thought.

"That's the stuff!" called Bob in such a loud whisper that it was heard all over the room, and caused considerable laughter.

"And a motor-cycle you shall have," said Mr. Wakefield, "the finest that can be bought. I am glad you took that. It gives me a chance to say that in the future the club intends having some motor-cycle races. Perhaps you will compete, Jerry, and if you do I hope you will do your best."

"Three cheers for Jerry Hopkins!" called some one, and they were given with a will.

"Your prize is not quite as optional as was Jerry's," said Mr. Wakefield, when Ned came forward in answer to his name. "Still we hope you will like it. I have picked out this for you," and he gave the boy a magazine rifle of the most expensive make, a regular beauty, at the sight of which Ned's eyes sparkled with joy.

"Three cheers for Ned Slade!" shouted a voice at the back of the room, and Ned was cheered until his face grew red with blushes.

It was not long before all the prizes had been given out. Then followed an entertainment.

"Let's go back and sit with the girls," suggested Ned. The three chums moved down the centre aisle, and found that the young ladies had anticipated their coming and had saved seats for them.

Mr. Wakefield sought out Jerry and whispered that his motor-cycle would be ordered at once, and would probably arrive in the course of a couple of weeks.

"Isn't it queer," said Ned. "Do you remember that day how we were talking about getting motor-cycles?"

"I remember," replied Jerry. "But I didn't think I would have one so soon. I wish you and Bob were going to get them now."

"I'm going to see if I can't," said Ned.

"Same here," came from the heavy-weight youth.

The party, increased by late comers, was more jolly than before, and laughter and jokes made the hours pass so pleasantly that when twelve o'clock boomed out on the chiming time-piece of the club, there was a chorus of cries from the girls.

"Oh! How late it is!" almost screamed Mollie Horton.

"And mother told me to be sure and be home by eleven," came from Alice. "We must start, girls."

The majority of boys and girls lived in the same neighborhood. They paired off, as young folks will, when they approach the age of sentiment, and by two marched down the now quiet streets of

Cresville, singing snatches of songs. It was a bright moon-light night, and the young people enjoyed every moment of it.

Ned, who had no sister to worry about, had asked permission to take Alice Vines home. She lived some distance from the others, though her route was the same as theirs for a little way. When it came time for Alice and Ned to take another path, they bade their companions good-night, and started off down the street together. Alice lived about half a mile from the parting of the ways, and Ned thought the distance all too short.

"I've had a very pleasant time," said Alice, when she reached her gate. "Thank you very much for bringing me home."

"The pleasure was all mine, I assure you," said Ned with a gallant bow, whereat Alice laughed.

Then Ned started home alone. His way lay past the Judson iron mill, a rather lonesome part of the town, but Ned did not care. Once he wished he had brought his new rifle along, instead of leaving it at the club house. Then he laughed to himself at his fears.

After he had passed his father's store, which was in darkness, he came to a part of the town where there were no street lamps. However the moon gave considerable light.

There were mysterious shadows, too, and once Ned thought one took on the shape of a man sneaking around a corner. He came to a halt, his heart beating wildly.

"Pshaw! It must have been a cloud," he declared.

A little later he came nearer the iron mill. It was located on the bank of a river, and the rushing of the water sounded rather uncanny in the lonesome night. Once more Ned started as he beheld a shadow glinting along the street ahead of him.

"That's no moon-shadow," argued the boy. "That's the outline of a man, if ever there was one. And it looked for all the world like Bill Berry. Well, I don't know's I'm afriad of him, and he certainly isn't of me."

He walked on boldly, whistling to keep up his courage, though he would have disputed that point had any one accused him. Then he came in full view of the mill. Through the glass door of the office he caught sight of a light. He gave a sudden start and hurried forward.

CHAPTER VII.

NODDY AND THE SQUARE BOX.

"A LIGHT in the mill!" exclaimed Ned softly. There must be something wrong. I never saw one there before. Mr. Judson has no night watchman either, unless he has gotten one in the last few days, which I doubt. I wonder what's up?"

In spite of the rather disagreeableness of the task Ned resolved to keep watch for a little while and see what developed.

He found a stone where he could sit down in the shadow and observe events. For some time nothing happened. The little light glowed steadily. Then it began to flicker and to move about.

Suddenly, off to the left, Ned heard a sound. It was just as if some one was walking along and trying to avoid making a noise. Only the breaking of a little piece of wood now and then, or the rattle of a pebble, showed that some one was moving.

Ned crouched down behind the stone on which

he had been sitting. He peered forward, straining his eyes in the uncertain light to catch the least glimpse of who ever was approaching. He started as he saw a man, bending low so as to conceal as much of himself as possible, steal from the yard of the mill and take up his position on the other side of the street, about fifty feet from where Ned was concealed.

"I'm almost certain that was Bill Berry," whispered Ned. "I'm positive now that something wrong is afoot. Bill isn't out on a night like this for any good. I wonder if I ought to run for help?"

For some time Ned kept watchful eyes in the direction Bill, or the man he supposed was him, had gone. He could see him, crouched all in a heap, beside a stone, just as Ned himself was. And the man seemed to be keeping a watch on the mill, exactly as Ned was doing.

"Maybe there are robbers in the mill now," argued Ned, "and Bill is keeping guard. I've a good notion to go and see if I can't find a policeman."

Once more Ned heard a movement in the direction of the mysterious watcher. He looked and saw the man straighten up and look cautiously about him. Then he saw him steal across the

street, go up to the door of the mill office, and peer in.

"I wish I dared do that," thought Ned. "Then I'd know whether I'm making a fool of myself, staying out like this when I ought to be in bed."

For more than a minute Bill Berry, for Ned could see plainly now that the man was the town bad character, stood and gazed into the mill office. Then, apparently satisfied with what he had seen, Bill tip-toed away and passed down the street and out of sight.

"Now it's my turn," whispered Ned, and he moved forward.

He looked up. The light was still glowing though faintly. Ned set his foot on the first wooden step. As if it had been a signal agreed upon the light went out suddenly, and the office was in darkness.

"Queer!" exclaimed Ned. "I wonder if whoever is in there could have heard me?"

A moment's reflection, however, showed him this could not have been the case.

"Maybe they are watching and saw me," he argued. This made him feel a little strange. To think that in the darkness, there might be evil eyes watching his every movement was not a pleasant

thought. He knew that he could be seen from within the mill, though he himself could observe nothing inside.

"Might as well look in, though, now I'm here," he said to himself.

So he boldly, but softly, went up the five steps, and, placing his hands on either side of his face, to shut out the little light of the moon that, now and then, straggled through the clouds, Ned peered anxiously into the office. As he had feared he could distinguish nothing. It was as black as the proverbial pocket.

Ned walked down the steps. As he did so he thought he heard, from within the mill, a sound, as if a door was slammed. He listened intently.

"I guess I must have fancied it," he said, "I must be getting nervous. That won't do. All the same I would like to have seen what Bill Berry did when he looked in while the light was there."

With this thought in mind Ned moved off. The iron mill took up quite a large space of ground, what would be termed a city block, and there were streets on three sides of it, besides a road along the river, between the stream and the mill. A high fence surrounded all but the front of the mill, though there were gates in it at intervals to admit the workmen and teams. To get to

his home Ned had to go to the farthest end of the mill fence, and turn up a street there. He was walking toward the corner, and was close to it, when he heard footsteps approaching.

He hesitated a moment. Then he reflected that he had as much right to be where he was as any one. The footsteps came nearer and nearer. Then, as Ned proceeded he turned the corner, and came face to face with Noddy Nixon!

Just then the moon, which had been hidden by a cloud, came out brightly. By its gleam Ned could distinguish the bully's features clearly. They bore a look of mingled rage and fear.

"Hello, Noddy," said Ned, resolving in spite of all that had taken place, to speak friendly. "Fine night, isn't it?"

"Look here!" burst out Noddy. "Are you spying on me? Can't I go to the river to get some fish bait without having every young cub in Cresville at my heels?"

"I wasn't spying on you, as you call it," said Ned quietly, "and if you think so the less I have to say to you the better off I'll be."

"I've a mind to knock your head off," spluttered Noddy. "Just mind your own business or you'll get into trouble, and it will be a kind you won't like."

Ned did not deem the remarks worthy of an answer. He turned and was hurrying past. As he did so he noticed that Noddy held tightly under one arm a small square box. It seemed to be made of wood. Catching Ned's glance at what he carried, Noddy rapidly shifted the box until it was hidden under his coat. Then, with angry mutterings, he hurried on.

"Rather a queer sort of box to use for his fish bait," thought Ned. "I wonder what he was up to, any how? And I wonder what that light in the mill meant? I've had quite a few adventures to-night. Guess I'd better get home before I meet with any more."

So he walked rapidly on, and reached his house without further incident. He soon fell asleep, to dream of being shut up in a small square wooden box with a big fish, while Noddy Nixon, on a motor-cycle, was riding off rapidly with the box under his arm.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MILL MYSTERY.

"HAVE you heard the news — great excitement — big robbery — everybody talking about it — hurry up!"

It was thus Andy Rush greeted Ned the next morning as he stopped at the latter's house on the way down town. Andy's hair was more disarranged than ever, and his blue eyes fairly shone.

"What's up?" asked Ned, who had come to the door in answer to Andy's whistle, having been met with the flow of words that startled him.

"Last night — midnight, I guess — Judson's mill — thousand dollars — great excitement — safe blown open — money taken — detectives notified — I'm off to see the fun — hurry up!"

"Hold on!" called Ned. "I saw — I know — " and then he stopped. The memory of what he had seen in the night; the light in the mill, the actions of Bill Berry, and his meeting with Noddy Nixon, who carried a square box; all this came to Ned in an instant. He was about to tell Andy,

but on second thought decided that he had better keep his own counsel, at least, for a while.

"Coming along? — no time to lose!" cried Andy.

"I'll be down after I have breakfast," replied Ned, waving a farewell to Andy, and returning to the house sorely puzzled.

He ate his breakfast rapidly. He hardly knew what to do in reference to what he had witnessed during his watch at the mill. After some thought he decided to wait a little while, learn more particulars of the robbery, and then relate everything to his father.

In a little while Mr. Slade left the house and Ned soon followed. When the lad reached the centre of the town it needed no one to tell him that there was considerable excitement. In a small place like Cresville news spreads quickly even without a daily paper.

Ned soon found his chums, Bob and Jerry.

"Have you heard about it?" demanded Ned.

"Yes, Andy Rush told me," said Jerry.

"And he told me, too," put in Bob. "That fellow is as swift as his name."

"Did you hear any particulars?" demanded Ned.

"It was an old-fashioned safe, according to

what the policeman told me," said Jerry, "and the burglars had little trouble in getting it open."

"Did they blow it apart?"

"No, simply took a chisel and hammer and cut the lock out. The door was only soft iron."

By this time the three boys were near the mill. There was quite a crowd about, and several policemen were on guard, preventing any one, but those having business, from entering the establishment.

"One side, please," called a man suddenly, coming up behind the three chums. "I'm in a hurry."

The boys turned aside, to give passage to a short, stout fussy man, who seemed in a tremendous state of excitement.

"That's Sheriff Blackwell," said Jerry. "I suppose he thinks the robbers are here waiting for him to arrest them."

There was really little news of the robbery to be had. Mr. Judson related what particulars he knew to the police.

"I had a little more than one thousand dollars on hand late yesterday afternoon," he said to the officers. "Several people paid me some bills, and, as it was late, I didn't go to the bank, but locked the money up in the safe. I seldom do this, as the iron box is no match for burglars.

"As far as I know the only persons who knew the money was in the safe were my son and myself. I am sure neither he nor I told any one."

"We must get right to work looking up clues," said the sheriff.

But there were apparently no clues. As has been said, the door of the safe was of soft iron. The robber, or robbers, had used a cold chisel and a hammer, and cut out a section of the door around the big clumsy lock. Then it was a comparatively easy matter to get at the cash. The thieves had left nothing behind them that would throw any light on the mystery.

Having learned all they could, and seeing that there were likely to be no developments at the mill, the three chums wandered up the street. All the while Ned was busy thinking. Finally he said:

"Boys, I've something to tell you. I want to ask your advice. It's about the robbery. Come where we can find a quiet place."

Soon the three chums were sitting comfortably beneath a big oak tree, that cast a pleasant shade from the sun, which was already hot, though it was early in the day.

"Now, let's hear the yarn," said Chunky.

Thereupon Ned told what he had seen while watching the mill the previous night.

"Well, I should say you did know something about the robbery," commented Jerry. "Why didn't you tell this to the police?"

"I did think of it," said Ned. "But I wanted to get some advice first. You see the light may or may not have had a connection with the crime."

"Yes, but it looks suspicious, seeing Bill Berry around," came from Bob.

"Are you sure it was him?" asked Jerry.

"As sure as I am that I'm talking to you now."

"And are you just as positive that it was Noddy?"

"Even more so. Wasn't I talking to him?"

"And he said he had fish bait in the square box?"

"He didn't exactly say so, but he intimated as much."

"If it was fish bait, why should he try to hide it, as you say he did?" asked Jerry.

"That's what puzzles me," replied Ned. "I only wish I had seen what Bill saw in the mill office when the light was burning."

"Maybe Bill is the robber," suggested Bob.

"I hardly think so," was Ned's opinion. "He may have had some connection with it, and may even have known about it. But, in my opinion the person who took the thousand dollars was the per-

son who had the light in the office, and that wasn't Bill."

"Do you — do you think Noddy — er — Noddy took the money?" asked Bob in a hesitating tone. He felt rather delicate about accusing an acquaintance, even one so undesirable as Noddy, of a serious crime.

"Well, I hate to think so, but it does look suspicious," said Ned. "He certainly acted afraid because he met me."

"Could any one get out of the office any way except going through the front door?" asked Bob.

"Yes," replied Ned. "There is a back door that goes out into the mill yard. From the yard a person could pass onto the road along the river, and then come up along the north side of the mill fence, on Peterson street."

"And it was at the corner of Peterson street and Maple alley that you met Noddy, wasn't it?"

"That's just where it was."

There was silence for a few minutes among the boys. Each one was busy with disagreeable thoughts.

"Did any of you hear how the mill office door was opened?" asked Ned.

"The lock wasn't forced on either the back or front door," answered Jerry. "So I was told.

The police think the robber used a skeleton key."

"Then it comes right down to a question. Is Noddy Nixon guilty?" asked Bob solemnly.

"It's hard to decide," replied Ned. "I'd hate to accuse any one, even when things look as suspicious as they do now. Do you think I ought to tell the police? Perhaps they will arrest both Bill and Noddy on suspicion."

"You'd have to be a witness against them, and that would not be very pleasant," suggested Jerry. "Besides their word would be as good as yours in court, and you have no proof. I think the best thing to do is to wait a while. If suspicion points more strongly to Noddy or Bill, then you can come forward and tell what you know."

"Then I'll wait a while," said Ned. "In the meantime we can, all three, have an eye on Noddy and Bill. They may do something or say something that would give us a clue."

"There's another thing I don't believe any of us have thought of," came from Jerry.

"What's that?"

"Why, you know, Mr. Nixon, Noddy's father, owns several shares in Judson's mill."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Ned.

"Positive. I heard mother saying something about it the other day. It seems the concern was

made a stock company not long ago, and Mr. Judson wanted mother to invest some of her money in it. He remarked at the time that Mr. Nixon had taken ten shares of the stock, and thought it a good investment."

"That might or might not throw additional suspicion on Noddy," remarked Ned. "If he knew his father was interested, financially, in the iron mill, he hardly would take money that he knew might cause his father a loss."

"Well, all this talking don't bring matters any nearer a solution," said Jerry, finally. "I think all we can do is to wait and watch."

"And meet every day to compare notes," suggested Ned.

CHAPTER IX.

THE QUEER BANK BILL.

It was the afternoon of the day the robbery of the mill was discovered. Ned, after his conference with his two chums, had gone down to his father's store. He wanted to talk to Mr. Slade about the prospects of getting a motor-cycle. For, now that Jerry was about to get one, the desire on Ned's part was all the stronger.

While standing in the front of the big department establishment his father owned Ned was surprised to see, passing on the other side of the street, Noddy Nixon and Paul Banner.

"That's queer," commented Ned. "I didn't know Noddy and Paul were as chummy as that. They didn't used to have much use for each other."

Then the idea suddenly came to him, that here was the very opportunity he desired. He could follow Noddy and Paul, and see if he might learn anything.

The bully and the dude, as Ned could observe from time to time, did not seem to be exactly in

accord. At times they would almost come to a halt, and dispute over something. Noddy seemed to be objecting to some course of action proposed by Paul.

"They must be going to the old wind mill," commented Ned, as he saw Noddy and Paul turn down a street that le to an old-fashioned, and deserted flour mill, that, in by-gone days, had been operated by wind power. The mill was a good distance from the edge of the town, in the centre of a big field.

Sure enough that was the destination of the two young men. Ned was as close after them as he dared to go. There was little risk of his being noticed while he was on the streets, but, after leaving them there was greater danger of detection for the trailer.

"However," argued Ned, "as long as I know where they are going, I don't need to keep so close after them. I can wait until they get to the mill, and then I can go there too. By coming up from the back, where there are no windows, which I can do by going through Hedges's Lane, they can't see me."

He approached the mill rapidly from the rear. As he came within hearing distance he could distinguish voices. And they seemed to be disput-

ing. The ancient establishment was full of cracks and broken places, and the noise from inside passed out freely. Nearer and nearer hurried Ned. At last he reached the broad platform that ran all around the base of the mill. He proceeded cautiously, taking care not to step in the big holes that yawned here and there. He crept around to a place near the front entrance to the old structure. Fortunately here he found where a board had come lose, so that it afforded a good listening place.

"I don't see what in the world you wanted to bring me all the way out to this lonely place for, my dear chap," Paul was saying.

"It's this way," Noddy was explaining. "I told you I was short of cash, and had to ask you to wait until to-day to pay the bet I made with you."

"But, my dear fellow," "Polly" expostulated, "why couldn't you pay me up there in town, just as well?"

"To tell you the truth," said Noddy, in a tone that would indicate to any one who knew him that he was going to do just the opposite, "I didn't want any one to see me paying you."

"And why not, pray, my dear chap?"

"Because I owe quite a few bets," replied

Noddy. "I am going to square them all up in a day or so, but if those I owe saw me paying you they would all come down on me at once and I would be financially embarrassed. I suppose you're ready to take the money now?"

"Ready, nay, anxious, my dear chap."

"Well, I had a little trouble in getting it," went on Noddy, not going into particulars, however. "And here it is. Just one hundred dollars, isn't it?"

"Correct, my dear boy."

"Ten fives are fifty," said Noddy, counting out some bills, "and twenty is seventy. Twenty more is ninety, and that ten makes just the hundred."

"Hold on here!" exclaimed Paul, when Noddy had come to the end of his counting. "This bill doesn't look just right."

"Which bill?"

"This last ten dollar one. I never saw one like it."

"Nonsense, that's all right," responded Noddy. "Let's see it."

Paul passed it back.

"Why, certainly it's good," Noddy said. "It's a state bank bill, instead of a national one, that's all. Issued by the Merchants' Bank of Boston."

"But what's that queer red mark on it?"

Noddy examined it more closely. Then he laughed.

"Some one has gone to the trouble of marking his initials on it in red ink," he said. "Probably for identification, or to serve as a mark. Maybe it was once used as a marked bill," and Noddy gave a short laugh. "See, there are the letters H. R. C."

"I guess you're right," agreed Paul. "Well, hand it over. I must be going. Sorry you lost the bet, but losers must pay, you know."

"Oh, I'm not squealing," retorted Noddy.

"Guess I'll be going," went on Paul. "Beastly long walk back to town."

Ned was glad to hear the sound of departing footsteps. He kept in hiding for five minutes, however, fearing Noddy might return. At the end of that time he ventured out. He saw Noddy and Paul almost across the field and knew he was safe.

Ned hurried back to town, going the same roundabout path he had taken in coming. He hastened to Jerry's house and told him what had taken place, and the two hunted up Bob and related the events to him.

"Things are getting warm," commented Bob.

"They are that," replied Jerry.

"I wonder if one of us couldn't get a talk with 'Polly' Banner?" suggested Jerry. "We might manage to get talking about queer bills, and 'Polly' would show us the one he had."

"Suppose you try that," Bob said.

"I'm willing," Jerry responded. "I'll take a walk down town now, and maybe I'll meet him. You wait until I some back."

Jerry resolved to first visit the club house of the athletic organization, as he knew Paul spent a good deal of his time there. Sure enough, he found Paul sitting at ease in a comfortable chair, smoking a perfumed cigarette and reading a book.

"I say, Paul," said Jerry, "you're not interested in old coins are you?"

"Old coins? No, my dear chap; why should I be interested in old coins?"

"Oh, I don't know. I was just wondering. Some people collect old coins, and some stamps. I favor stamps, myself."

"Now that you speak of it," said Paul, "I remember I have an old bill about me. It's rather odd. Maybe you'd be interested in it."

"Let's see," replied Jerry, thanking his stars that he was about to accomplish his purpose so easily.

Paul drew out the odd ten dollar note Noddy

had given him. Just as Ned had reported, it was an old style state bank note. And, in one of the blank spaces on the reverse side some one had made a very elaborate monogram of the initials H. R. C.

"Quite a curiosity," observed Jerry, passing the bill back.

"I think so," said Paul, puffing out thick clouds of smoke from his Egyptian cigarette. "But I suppose there is no premium on it."

"There might be," replied Jerry in as careless a tone as he could assume. "If I were you I'd save it and see."

"I will," said Paul. "I'll place it in the very back part of my wallet, and I won't spend it until I see a coin catalog. That's an easy way to make money."

"Where did you get the bill?" asked Jerry. "Perhaps you can get more."

"Noddy Nixon gave it to me," responded Paul. "I wasn't going to take it at first, but he told me it was good."

"Oh, I reckon it's good enough," answered Jerry. "Well, I guess I'll be traveling. Good-bye, Paul."

"Good afternoon, my dear chap," answered Paul, lighting another cigarette.

"I'll not forget how that bill looks," said Jerry to himself, as he sought his two chums and told them what had taken place between Paul and himself.

CHAPTER X.

THE MOTOR-CYCLE.

It was about a week after the foregoing events when Jerry received a letter, bearing in the upper left-hand corner of the envelope the mark of the C. H. & D. Railroad.

He read the missive, which was short and to the point. Briefly it informed Jerry that there awaited him at the freight office of the road one motor-cycle, which he could have by calling and presenting the enclosed way-bill.

"Hurrah!" shouted the boy. "Three cheers for the Cresville Athletic Club and Mr. Wakefield! Hurrah!"

Jerry lost no time in calling for his two chums, and the three boys hurried together to the freight depot.

"What can I do for you boys?" asked Mr. Hitter, the agent in charge.

"I come to get what that calls for," replied Jerry, handing over the way-bill.

"Oh, yes, one of them new-fangled bicycles that

take a steam engine to run 'em. Well, you'll find it down at the end of the platform," said Mr. Hitter. "Now, be careful, and don't blow yourself up. Boys is dreadful careless like," he muttered, as he went on with his work.

Boxed in a big crate, at the end of the freight platform, the boys found the motor-cycle. It was addressed in big letters to "Jerry Hopkins, Esq.," and marked "With Care."

"Shall I unpack it here or get it taken up to the house, crate and all?" asked Jerry of his chums.

"Oh, unpack it here. Then you can ride it home," said Bob.

"I know about as much how to ride one as I would how to run a locomotive," objected Jerry. "I've studied the catalogs, of course, but I think I'd better start it up at home first."

"Oh, go ahead, ride it home," put in Ned. "We can manage to find out how it works, and we can get some gasolene over to the drug store."

So, rather against his own calmer judgment, Jerry decided to do as his friends wished. He borrowed a hammer from Mr. Hitter and soon the crate was broken apart and the motor-cycle, in all its mechanical beauty, was revealed.

It certainly was a fine machine and had all the

latest improvements. There were two cylinders instead of one, insuring great speed; the tires were large, and there was a large reservoir for gasolene. It was of the latest make and not generally on the market as yet.

"Here's a book that tells all about how to run it," said Bob, catching sight of a pamphlet of directions.

The boys read the directions over carefully. It seemed simple enough. All there was to do was to put some gasolene in the tank, see that the batteries gave a proper current, start the machine off, turn on the gasolene, switch on the spark and ride off.

"I'll get the gasolene," volunteered Ned. He ran over to the drug store and came back with a can full.

"Now try and see if there's a good spark," Jerry suggested.

Satisfied that the batteries were in working order, Jerry prepared to take his first ride. The street leading from the railroad depot was a long straight wide one.

"It's a good thing," commented Jerry, referring to the highway. "There's plenty of chance to be run away with, and not damage anything. I can ride clear to New York if I go far enough."

"I wouldn't this time, though," said Bob.

Jerry smiled. It was a rather dubious sort of a grin, to be sure. Much as he wanted a motor-cycle, he knew there was a little risk in riding one when he was not thoroughly familiar with it. However, he wasn't going to back out. He got on the ponderous machine, which Bob and Ned steadied for him.

"Give me a little shove."

Bob and Ned did so.

"Work the pedals and get a good start," advised Bob.

Jerry did so. Soon he was moving off at a fair speed, though, of course, just as if he was on an ordinary bicycle.

"Turn on the gasolene!" shouted Ned.

"And throw in the spark!" called Bob.

"Here she goes," Jerry yelled back.

There was a series of sharp explosions, like a machine gun being fired at top speed, and the motor-cycle, with Jerry aboard, started off.

"Hurrah!" shouted Ned and Bob.

Bang! Bang! Bang! the machine went, and soon Jerry was a quarter of a mile down the road.

"He ought to shut off the exhaust," commented Bob. "He can do that on this machine. On some you can't."

The two boys, thinking of nothing but motorcycles and their chances of getting them, passed down the road. Jerry was out of sight. In a little while they espied a cloud of dust down the highway. It seemed to be moving toward them.

"Here comes Jerry, I guess," Bob said.

"And he's moving like the wind!" exclaimed Ned.

In a few minutes the dust cloud was nearer, and then the boys saw that it was Jerry approaching at a rapid rate. His machine did not make so much noise now. But, as he came nearer, Bob and Ned, who caught a glimpse of his face, thought he looked a little worried.

"Hold on! Can't you stop?" cried Bob, for Jerry was about to pass.

"That's the trouble!" Jerry yelled as he whizzed past. "I can't seem to shut off the power!"

Then he was lost in a cloud of dust, going down the road in the opposite direction.

"Something's wrong!" Bob ejaculated.

"He's forgotten which lever to pull!" exclaimed Ned. "If he don't look out there'll be trouble."

As he spoke Jerry came flying back.

"Can't one of you do something?" he cried.

"I'm afraid to take my hands off the bars long enough to pull the levers again, and the last time I yanked them I seemed to turn on more power. I'll ride down the road a way and turn back. Think up something in the meanwhile!"

"He's in a pickle!" exclaimed Ned.

"I have it!" cried Bob.

"What?"

"The next time he comes past yell at him to ride around in a circle until we can look in the book of directions on how to run a motor-cycle."

And so, the next time Jerry whizzed by, with a comical worried look on his face, Bob yelled:

"Ride around us in a circle, Jerry. Make believe you're on the track. Ned and I will look in the book and see how to stop you!"

Jerry obeyed. Around and around he went, the machine kicking up a cloud of dust. In the centre of the ring stood Bob and Ned, pouring over the pages of the book.

"There it is!" cried Ned, pointing to something on one page.

"What does it say?" asked Bob.

"To stop the machine pull lever A and throw off B toward you three notches," read Ned.

"Pull lever A and throw off B toward you three notches!" Bob yelled to Jerry.

"Which is lever A and which is lever B?" asked Jerry. "They're not marked on the machine."

"That's so, I forgot that," admitted Ned.

"What am I going to do?" begged Jerry. "Have I got to ride around like this all night?"

"What's in the name of Tunket is the trouble?" asked Mr. Hitter, the station agent, who was on his way down the road, and who had come to where Jerry was riding around in a circle with Bob and Ned in the centre.

"He can't stop!" cried Ned and Bob at once.

"I knowed there'd some trouble come of that machine," said Mr. Hitter, shaking his head. "I told you not to monkey with 'em. It all comes of man trying to improve on nature. Walking's good enough for me. What particular form of trouble does the critter seem to be suffering from? I mean the motor-cycle."

"There's two levers," explained Bob. "One is A and the other is B, according to the book. The trouble is they are not marked on the machine, and Jerry don't know which one to pull."

"Well, not knowing much about the case, I would advise him to pull 'em both," said Mr. Hitter. "He can't be any worse off than he is now, and maybe it'll stop him."

"Good!" exclaimed Bob. "That's it. Why didn't we think of that?"

"Why didn't we?" was all Ned could say.

Then they both shouted to Jerry, who was still pursuing his weary round:

"Move both levers, Jerry!"

Jerry did so. In an instant the motor-cycle ceased the explosions, and, in a little while it slowed down so that Jerry could dismount.

"Well, that certainly was an experience," commented Jerry, as he wiped the dust from his face. "But it was fun all the same," he added, whereat Mr. Hitter laughed.

"Boys will be boys," the station agent muttered as he went off down the road.

"Funny the machine got such a fit on," said Ned, examining the motor-cycle closely. "I didn't think they would act like that."

"Here's the difficulty," cried Bob, who was also looking over the apparatus. "This piece of wire ought to have been taken off. It was put on temporarily when the machine was packed. See, it held the gasolene lever and the spark one also, so they couldn't come back separately. You had to pull them both at once to shut off the flow of fluid and the current of electricity. It's a thing

that wouldn't happen if we hadn't been in such a hurry."

"Well, it all came out right," said Jerry. "I'm going to ride the machine home."

And he did without further mishap, stopping and starting the motor without trouble, now that the wire was off.

CHAPTER XI.

MACHINES FOR BOB AND NED.

THAT night two very earnest lads implored two fathers to purchase motor-cycles for them. As Bob and Ned were both sons of well-to-do parents the matter was not much one of cost.

"To tell you the truth," said Mr. Baker to Bob. "I'm a little afraid of those machines. They are dangerous."

"I'll be careful," pleaded Bob.

"I know, but that's what every one says at first," objected Mr. Baker.

At the same time the same sort of a conversation was going on in the Slade household.

"You say there's no danger," Mr. Slade was remarking in answer to Ned's statement to that effect. "But I heard about Jerry Hopkins and his experience this afternoon. It seems to me there was danger there."

It was three days before the two fathers arrived at a decision. They had consulted in the meanwhile, and Jerry's machine had been closely

examined. Bob and Ned had both taken turns on it, and showed that, after a little practice, they could run it perfectly. Jerry, also, had become quite expert.

In the meantime the boys were so engrossed with the idea of motor-cycles that they had almost forgotten about the mill robbery. They met, according to appointment, under the tree in the woods, but there was nothing new to tell. With the discovery of the queer bank bill, and the knowledge that Paul Banner was saving it, the boys resolved to let the matter rest for a while.

The police and detectives, and even the fussy sheriff, had discovered nothing, save that the money was gone, which every one knew. As for Noddy, he did not act like a guilty person. Bill Berry had disappeared for the time being.

Noddy seemed to have plenty of money. He was careful not to apply to his father again, however, and the source of his supply was a mystery except to himself. In about a week Mr. Nixon, of his own accord, gave Noddy two hundred dollars.

"I hope you will spend it wisely, my son," he said. "It is wicked to waste money, when so much good can be done with it."

"I say, father," began Bob to Mr. Baker one

evening, a little more than a week after the time Jerry had received his prize motor-cycle, "have you thought any more about that machine for me?"

"I have made up my mind," went on Mr. Baker, with exasperating slowness, "that you can not —"

"Oh, father!" burst out Bob.

"That you can not get along without one," finished the banker with a laugh, "and so I have ordered one for you."

"Thanks dad!" was all Bob could say, but the two words meant a good deal.

At the same time, according to arrangement between Mr. Baker and Mr. Slade, the latter was announcing to his son Ned, that he could have the much-wanted machine. If there were two happier boys than Ned and Bob in Cresville that night, no one knew where to find them.

"We'll have lots of sport," said Bob. "I know of a dozen trips we can take, that would be too long for a bicycle."

Three days later the two motor-cycles came, and the chums could hardly wait to unpack them. Bob's and Ned's machines were just like Jerry's except in a few minor points.

Jerry was delighted that his chums' machines

had arrived. He got his own out and soon all three were speeding down the road. In point of fastness there was not much to choose from among the three motors. None of the boys had risked running the cycles at top speed yet, and at the half-way mark each one developed about the same swiftness.

The boys rode for several miles. It was a pleasant day, with a bright sun overhead, while an early morning shower had laid the dust. After an hour's travel Bob said:

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm hungry."

In a few minutes they stopped their motor-cycles in front of a big white farm house, and walked up the path to the side door.

On the porch they found a motherly looking woman churning. She smiled at the sight of the three boys, and took off her apron, which was splashed with butter-milk, as she came forward to greet them.

"Good-afternoon," she said pleasantly.

"We stopped to see if we could get something to eat," began Jerry. "We're willing to pay for it, of course," he added, fearing the woman might think they were tramps. "Anything will do. Some cookies, a little milk or a piece of pie."

"I guess I can fix you something," said the woman. "Hi! You Jason!" she called in a loud voice. "Come and run this churn while I set out a lunch for some visitors."

In answer to her hail an old man, shuffled around the corner of the house.

"I'm comin'," he said in a quavering voice. "I'm a leetle mite slow, 'cause the rheumatiz catches me to-day, Alvirah. But I'm comin'."

"It's my grand uncle," the woman explained to the boys. "He's almost ninety years old, but he can churn as good as I can. Can't you, Jason."

"I reckon so, Alvirah."

While the farmer's wife bustled around to set out a simple meal for the boys, the latter sat out on the porch watching old Jason churn. He moved the dasher up and down, a queer chugging sound following each stroke.

"How did you come, anyhow? Walk?" asked the old man presently.

"On motor-cycles," replied Ned.

"I didn't know they had them flyin' machines in working order yit," exclaimed the old man.

"Come on, boys," interrupted the farmer' wife. "I have a little something here for you.

The "little something" proved to be quite a meal. There was nice fresh bread, with the best

butter the boys had ever eaten. There was also honey right from the bee hives, some rich milk, a plate of doughnuts and cheese, and two big pies, one apple and the other peach.

"This is very kind of you," said Jerry. "We didn't want you to go to all this trouble."

"I'm sure it's no trouble," replied the woman. "I'm glad you came along. It's rather lonesome out this way. We don't often have company."

The boys ate with a will. When they had finished there was not much left on the table.

"How much do we owe you?" asked Jerry, as he and his chums rose in preparation to continue their journey.

"Oh, I reckon ten cents will be about right," was the answer. But Jerry insisted on paying twenty-five cents for each, and, after some argument, the woman accepted it.

Soon the boys were well on the road toward Cresville. They talked of many things, and planned several trips in the near future. As they turned into the main road leading to their homes they heard a chugging sound behind them.

All three came to a halt, dismounted, and sat down under a tree. Nearer and nearer came the sound of the approaching motor-cycle. Then, in a cloud of dust, a solitary rider whizzed past.

"Did you see who that was?" asked Ned.

"Noddy Nixon."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. I heard the other day that he was going to get a machine. That was him, sure enough."

"I don't think he goes so very fast," observed Jerry.

"He does, all the same," was Bob's opinion. "You can make up your mind Noddy will have as fast a machine as there is built."

"I suppose he bought it with some of the proceeds of the mill robbery," cried Jerry.

"Hush!" cried Ned. "Don't say such things. Some one might hear you and it would make trouble. Besides, we have not proved Noddy guilty yet."

"Well," said Bob with a shrug of his shoulders, "I hope we don't meet him very often when we are out on the road. He's not the most pleasant fellow in the world."

"There's not much danger of his seeking our company," came from Jerry. "He is not overfond of any of us."

The three boys rested for a while beneath the tree and, then as the sun sank, they mounted their cycles, put on good speed, and arrived home in time

for supper, bearing excellent appetites, in spite of the good meal they had had at the farm house.

CHAPTER XII.

A WILD NIGHT RIDE.

"I SAY, Jerry," began Bob, dismounting from his motor-cycle one afternoon in front of his chum's house, "what do you say to a night ride?"

"You mean on our machines?"

"Sure. Let's get acetylene gas lamps, that give a good light, and ride over to Fallsburg and back. We can start in the evening and easily make the round trip in five or six hours."

Fallsburg was a town about the size of Cresville and forty miles distant therefrom. The road between was a fairly good one most of the way, and, by making a circuit involving about five miles more of travel an excellent highway for the whole distance was available.

It was decided to start right after supper, and the chums calculated they could make Fallsburg in about three hours. They did not intend to ride fast, and were out for pleasure rather than for speed.

Without special incident the trip to Fallsburg

was concluded. It was nine o'clock when the boys reached the town, which was quite a lively place. Considerable of a stir was caused when our three heroes rode in on their machines, which were somewhat of a novelty there.

"Hurrah! I see an ice cream sign!" exclaimed Ned, pointing down the street.

Little time was lost in getting to the store and after each had put away a large plate of the frozen stuff the boys felt better. The tables in the ice cream parlor were separated one from the other by large screens. In the improvised apartment just back of where the three boys were sitting, voices in low conversation could be heard.

"Are you sure Noddy will be there?" was the cautious inquiry that came to the ears of our heroes. At the sound of that name all three started.

"He'll be there if his machine doesn't break, which it has an unpleasant habit of doing lately," a second voice said.

"And do you think he'll bring the money?"

"He'd better if he knows what's good for him," was the answer. "He's put me off long enough."

"The old house by the cross-roads is the place, ain't it?" asked the party who had first spoken.

"That's it, and if Noddy don't show up he'll hear from me in a way he won't like."

"Come on," whispered Jerry to his chums. "Let's get out of this before those men see us."

Quietly the three boys left the ice cream parlor. They did not speak until they were in the street.

"What do you suppose they were talking about?" asked Ned.

"I don't know what the subject was," replied Jerry, "but I venture to say the person they meant was our acquaintance, Noddy Nixon."

"And he's evidently expected to pay over some money to-night," added Bob.

"At the old house at the cross-roads," put in Ned. "I'll bet I know where they mean."

"Where?" asked Jerry.

"Don't you remember that old tumbled-down place we passed about three miles outside of this town? Near the blacksmith shop?"

"You mean right after we crossed the river?" inquired Jerry.

"That's it."

The same thought was in the minds of all three. Bob was the first to mention it.

"Let's go out there and see what we can learn," he said. "It is on our way home, and we have plenty of time."

"There may be some danger," objected Jerry.

"Nonsense. We have as much right there as

any one. All we have to do is to stop off from our motor cycles as we pass. No one can object to that."

After some further conversation it was agreed to do this. The boys wandered about the streets a while longer and, as it was nearing eleven o'clock, they thought they had better start. They found their machines in proper order, and soon were moving slowly out of town.

"There's no use being in too much of a hurry," advised Bob. "Probably Noddy won't meet the men there much before midnight, and it lacks half an hour of that now."

A little later the three boys came in sight of the deserted house. Lonesome and uncanny enough it looked, the moonlight making mysterious shadows here and there.

"Go easy," spoke Ned. "No need to tell them we are coming if by any chance they are there."

Silently the boys dismounted from their cycles, leaned the machines up against the fence a short way from in front of the house, and crept up through the long grass that filled the yard of the old vacant structure.

"Hold on!" cried Bob suddenly.

All three came to a halt.

"What is it?" whispered Jerry.

For answer Bob pointed toward a shed at the side of the house. In it could be seen a light gleaming.

"Are they in there?" asked Jerry.

"No, but some one's motor-cycle is," replied Bob.

Foot by foot the three boys made toward the dark and deserted house. They had circled half way around it, and, coming to the rear, were suddenly brought to a halt by a sliver of light shooting out from some crack.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Bob.

They stopped and looked toward the light. It came from the kitchen window, which was closed by broken shutters through a splintered slat of which the gleam came. On tip-toes the three boys crept under the window. They peered into the room, and the sight that met their eyes made them start in surprise.

Seated around a rough table, on which stood a lighted candle stuck in a bottle, were three figures. One was Bill Berry, the other was a stranger and the third was Noddy Nixon. The stranger was holding a pistol to Noddy's head, and seemed to be threatening him.

Bill Berry was looking on, and taking no part in

the proceedings, evidently. Then, as the boys watched, they saw Noddy, plainly in fear of the man with the weapon, pull from his pocket a roll of bills.

He gave it to the stranger, fairly throwing it at him in a rage. Then the man with the pistol, smiling in a satisfied way, put up his weapon. Noddy was saying something, for the boys could see his lips moving, but they could not hear the words, for the window was closed.

"Queer doings," whispered Jerry.

At that instant Ned, in an endeavor to see better, leaned a little forward. A piece of board he was standing on broke with a loud crash, and he toppled forward, hitting the window shutter with his elbow.

Like a flash Noddy, Bill and the strange man leaped to their feet and gazed in the direction of the window.

"Quick! Light out of this!" exclaimed Bob, "They will be after us in another minute!"

Sure enough, after a moment's hesitation, Noddy ran toward the door with the intention of going outside and seeing who had made the racket.

"Hurry!" whispered Bob hoarsely. "To the motor-cycles!"

The three boys lost no time. Hastening on in

the darkness they stumbled and ran to where they had left their machines.

As they reached them they heard a door opened, and footsteps in hot pursuit.

"Who is it?" they heard Noddy's voice inquiring.

The boys rolled their motor-cycles out in the road. They leaped into the saddles, started off, and in another instant had turned on the power and were off down the highway leading to Cresville. As they whizzed past the house, in which several lights now gleamed, they heard Noddy cry:

"Confound them! I'll fix them for spying on me!"

At the same time they heard the explosions that indicated that Noddy had put his motor cycle in operation.

"The race is on!" cried Ned.

And a race it was to be. They were about thirty-five miles from home. There was a good road, and, with the moon high up now, it was well lighted. The acetylene lamps on the machines also gave good illumination. In a few minutes the motors of the three boys were humming on half-speed.

Behind them, borne on the night wind, could be heard the puffing of the motor-cycle in pursuit.

But the three chums had a start of several minutes, which counted much.

"Look behind and see if you can see his lamp," said Ned.

"Not a gleam," reported Bob, after a hasty glance.

Several miles were passed in this fashion, the pursuing machine getting no nearer. Then, all at once, Ned cried:

"I can see his light!"

It was true. Either Noddy had increased his speed, or he had emerged from behind some bend in the road that hitherto hid the gleam of his lamp from the boys.

At the same time the explosions of his motor sounded louder.

"He's catching up to us!" cried Jerry. "Shall we turn on more power?"

"It's a little risky," cautioned Bob. "Especially as we don't know the road very well. However, another notch or two won't do any harm."

Noddy was now within an eighth of a mile. His speed was increasing. Suddenly he called:

"Whoever you are, stop, or I'll shoot!"

"He don't know who we are, anyhow," said Jerry.

"I'm going to fire!" shouted Noddy.

"This is getting exciting!" cried Ned.

"He is only trying to scare us," exclaimed Bob.

Then came a loud report.

"That wasn't a revolver!" exclaimed Jerry. "It sounded as if one of his tires burst. That's it!" he added a second later, as he looked back. "Noddy has had an accident. I guess this race is off!"

True enough, the front tire on Noddy's machine had collapsed. He was forced to stop, and, as the boys sped on they could hear him faintly calling after them. The three chums reduced the speed of their motors, but did not stop, and soon they were out of sight and hearing of Noddy.

"Well, we certainly had an adventure," came from Ned. "I wonder what it was all about?"

"We'll find out some day," was Jerry's opinion.

Then, once more they took up their journey, and reached Cresville without further happening, arriving just before daylight.

CHAPTER XIII.

ADVENTURES ON THE ROAD.

"WANT to take a ride with me?" asked Bob of Ned, one morning, about a week following the exciting night ride. "Father wants me to go over to Franklin to take a message to the bank there."

"Sure I'll go. And we'll ask Jerry. Wait until I get my machine, and I'll be with you."

The two boys were soon puffing along their motors to Jerry's house. He joined them and all three started off for Franklin.

The ride was a pleasant one. It was rather warm, but there was a cool breeze, that was added to by the speed at which the boys rode. Franklin was about twenty miles from Cresville, and was a village of good size. The boys had some friends there, and intended calling on them before returning.

They reached Franklin without mishaps. Bob transacted the business his father had sent him on, and then the boys voted that a meal would not be out of place.

"Well, I guess we'll have to be starting back," said Bob at length. "Father will want to know how I made out with his matter."

Ned and Jerry were agreeable, and they mounted their machines and were soon on the homeward journey.

They had gone perhaps ten miles when, on making a sudden turn in the road, they came face to face with a countryman who was driving a rather spirited horse. At the sight and sound of the machines the animal reared up in the air. The boys stopped their motors, but the horse would not be quieted. Even the sight of the cycles seemed to madden the brute. In spite of the efforts of the countryman the horse continued to rear and prance. Then the steed made a sudden turn, and, with a cracking sound, one of the carriage shafts broke.

"Now ye've gone and done it!" yelled the driver, seeming to fly in a rage. "Ye'll have to pay for this."

"We're very sorry," began Jerry, "we didn't intend to cause any trouble."

"That's always the way with peesky boys," went on the countryman. "I'll have the law on ye for this! You wait until I get out."

The horse, having done what damage he could, seemed to be satisfied, and quieted down. The

driver dismounted and tied the animal to a fence, and then proceeded to examine the broken shaft.

"Busted clean off," he announced in an ugly tone. "It'll cost five dollars to get it fixed. You'll have to settle."

"That's right, make 'em pay!" exclaimed a voice from the bushes that lined the road side, and, to the surprise of the three boys, Noddy Nixon stepped out into view.

"I intend to," said the countryman.

"They've no business on the road in their machines, frightening horses," went on Noddy with a grin. "The roads are for carriages."

"Well, I like your nerve, Noddy Nixon!" exclaimed Jerry hotly. "We have just as much right on the road as this driver has. And you've got a motor-cycle yourself."

"That's none of your business," remarked Noddy in a surly tone. "You cubs frightened this man's horse, and he has a right to demand payment. Don't let 'em get away until they pay," Noddy added to the driver.

"I don't intend they shall," was the answer.

"Look here!" exclaimed Bob. "We never said we didn't intend to pay, but it's none of your business, Noddy."

"Don't give me any of your lip," the bully

roared. "I've been wanting to thrash you for some time, and now I have a good chance."

"Go ahead, if you think it's healthy," said Bob boldly. "I'm not afraid of you."

"If you fight him, you'll have to fight me," said Jerry, coming forward and standing beside Bob.

"Yes, and me also," said Ned.

"I guess I'll have to take a hand then," said the countryman. "I want pay for my broken shaft. If I can't get it in money I'll take it out of your hides."

"If you touch us I'll make a complaint and cause your arrest," said Jerry.

"Who's talking about arrests?" asked a gruff voice, and, from the bushes whence Noddy had made his appearance Bill Berry stepped out.

At the sight of him Noddy grinned, and moved closer to Bob.

"That's big talk for a small boy," Bill went on with a laugh. "What's the row, Noddy?"

"Oh, these young cubs frightened this gentleman's horse, the animal broke a shaft, and they won't pay for it."

"That isn't true," cried Bob. "We never refused to pay for the damage."

"Make 'em pay!" cried Bill, slapping his hand

on his thigh with a sound like a pistol shot. "Make 'em pay!"

In a fit of passion Noddy aimed a blow at Bob. The boy dodged it cleverly, and shot out his fist toward Noddy's face. He only landed lightly on the bully's nose, but that, with the overbalancing caused when he missed his mark, sent Noddy down in a heap.

"I'll make you pay for this!" he fairly screamed as he scrambled up.

He rushed at Bob. Ned and Jerry ran up and were about to aid their chum.

"Let me attend to him alone!" pleaded Bob.

"I'll fix you!" screamed the bully.

Once more he aimed a fearful blow at Bob, but the latter merely stepped to one side, and once more Noddy went down, without having been hit. He arose with his mouth full of dust.

At that instant the countryman's horse, probably frightened by the noise and shouts, reared on its hind legs, broke the strap that fastened him to the fence, and galloped off down the road.

"Consarn ye! There goes my best horse!" cried the countryman, losing all interest in the fight. "Five dollars to whoever catches him!"

"I'm going to have a try for that!" exclaimed Bill, setting off down the road on a swift run.

"Five dollars don't come my way every afternoon!"

"I'll sue ye for this!" yelled the countryman, shaking his fist at the boys before speeding down the highway after Bill in pursuit of the horse. "I'll have the law on ye!" His coat tails streamed in the wind as he raced away.

Noddy had stopped mid-way in his rush at Bob as the horse broke loose.

"Well, are you going to fight?" asked Bob coolly.

But Noddy's desire for battle seemed to have left him suddenly. He realized that he was no match for the three, or even for two, of the boys.

"I'll get square with you for this," he muttered as he slunk away in the bushes. "I've several scores to settle with you three cubs."

"Better settle 'em here and now," advised Jerry. "It's a good chance."

"You just wait," was all Noddy would say. Soon he disappeared in the shrubbery.

"Well, I thought for a while there was going to be trouble," said Bob, with a laugh. "Noddy certainly seemed mad."

"Well, I don't see any need of staying here any longer," said Ned at length. "It doesn't seem as if the countryman or Bill would come back. If

that man with the horse wants any pay let him call and collect. He didn't treat us very nicely. As for Noddy, I guess he's far enough off by now."

"I wonder what he was doing out this way?" asked Bob.

"Yes, and lately Bill Berry is always with him," commented Ned.

"They're up to no good, you can be sure of that," was Jerry's opinion, in which the others shared.

Then, mounting their motor-cycles, the three boys made good speed home, meeting with no more fractious horses and puncturing no more tires.

CHAPTER XIV.

A FIRE AND A DISCOVERY.

"FIRE! Fire! Fire!"

Loud shouts of this dreadful alarm, mingled with the ringing of bells, the tooting of whistles and the hurrying of many feet awoke Jerry late one night, three days after the encounter in the road with the countryman and his skittish horse.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!" yelled men and boys hastening down the street.

"Where's the blaze?" asked Jerry, throwing open his window and calling down to those running past.

"Judson's mill!" was the cry. "Looks like a big fire!"

Jerry looked in the direction of the mill, and saw a glare in the sky.

"I'm going!" he exclaimed.

"Oh Jerry, you might get hurt," objected Mrs. Hopkins.

"I'll be careful, mother," replied the boy, rapidly dressing.

On his way to the blaze he met Ned, who had also been awakened from his sleep by the alarm. The two boys hurried toward the mill, to which point it seemed as if every one in Cresville was hastening. The glare in the sky grew brighter.

"Here comes one of the engines!" cried Ned, as the apparatus dashed past. It was one of two new steamers recently purchased.

"Hurry up, and let's see it work!" called Jerry, and the boys increased their run.

"How'd the mill catch fire?" panted Ned.

"I — didn't — hear," answered Jerry, breathing hard.

In a little while they were at the scene of the blaze. One of the smaller buildings of the mill was burning furiously. Smoke, flames and sparks were spouting from the roof, which was almost consumed.

Up dashed the engines. Connections were quickly made to hydrants, and soon two good sized streams were playing on the flames. The puffing of the steamers, the snapping and crackle of the flames, the shouts of those looking on, the yells of the firemen and the crash as pieces of the burning building fell in, made a din that was chaotic.

"Stand back boys!" exclaimed one of the firemen. "We want to run a hose in that gate."

The boys made room and were now joined by Bob.

"Can we go in?" asked Jerry. "We'll keep well back."

The gate in front of which they stood gave access to the mill yard, at a point quite a distance from the fire.

"I guess it won't do any harm," answered the fireman who was a good natured man. "But keep well back in case the walls fall. We don't want any one to get hurt."

"We'll be careful," promised Jerry, and the boys followed the fire-fighter within the gate, helping him drag the hose, which was twisting and turning like a snake trying to get loose, so strong was the water pressure.

At last the fury of the fire seemed to have spent itself. The flames died down and all that remained to do was to wet down the ruins thoroughly to prevent any sparks from flying to other departments of the mill. The blaze had been confined to the building where it started, and, in spite of the excitement over it, the damage had been small.

"I'm glad it didn't get into my office," remarked Mr. Judson, the mill owner, who had arrived on the scene soon after the fire started.

"All my valuable books and papers would have been destroyed."

"Yes, you got off pretty lucky," said the chief.

"Thanks to the hard work you and your men did," Mr. Judson replied. "I won't forget it, I assure you."

"We only did our duty," responded the chief modestly. "It's our business to put out fires."

There was not much more of interest to see, and the three boys, as did a number of others, began to think of going home.

Ned, Jerry and Bob started from the mill yard. As they passed a pile of lumber near the gate Ned gave one of the boards a careless kick. There was a rattling sound and a small round object rolled out at his feet.

"What's that?" asked Jerry.

"Look's like a tin can," observed Bob.

Ned picked it up to examine it better, for it was now quite dark, the fire giving only a faint glow.

"Look at this!" Ned cried, holding out the object.

"It's a burglar's dark lantern!" exclaimed Bob. "I saw one just like it that the police took from a thief. It is over to police headquarters."

"Wonder who put it there?" asked Jerry.

"It's hard to —" began Ned, and then he stop-

ped. Dropping to his knees he reached his hand into the hole from whence the dark lantern had rolled. He groped around a few seconds and then drew out his hand.

"I've found 'em," he said.

"What?" asked Jerry.

"The things I was looking for," and Ned held up to view in the faint gleam from the burned building a cold chisel and a hammer.

"What are they for?" asked Bob, not seeing the connection of the dark lantern and the tools just found.

"These are the things the mill safe was robbed with," replied Ned. "The lantern made the light that puzzled me that night I came past, and with this cold chisel and hammer the lock was cut out. The thief must have hidden the things under the boards as he ran away with the money. It was on his route as he passed out of the gate."

"This mill robbery seems to follow us," observed Jerry. "Every once in a while something about it crops out."

"Yes," commented Ned. "I saw the robbery being committed, or rather I was there while it was being done, we learned about the queer bank bill and Noddy's connection with it, and now we have discovered the tools that were used."

"All we need to do next is to recover the money," said Bob.

"And find the thief," said Ned.

"I fancy that won't be difficult to do," added Bob. "If Noddy—"

"Hush!" exclaimed Ned, "some one is coming! Let's get out of here!"

Hurriedly Ned hid under his coat the lantern, the hammer and chisel, and the three boys passed out of the mill yard.

"What are you chaps doin' here?" demanded a rough voice, and Bill Berry shuffled up, looking sharply at first one and then another.

"We were watching the fire," replied Ned politely. "Any objections, Mr. Berry?"

"You boys better keep away from here," growled Bill. "I reckon Mr. Judson don't want another robbery."

"What do you mean?" demanded Jerry. "Do you mean that we robbed the mill?"

"Well you might and then agin you mightn't," mumbled Bill. "I ain't sayin' as how you did, and I ain't sayin' as how you didn't. You'd better move on."

"We've as much right here as you have, Bill Berry," said Bob. "We're ready to go and we're going; all you may say wouldn't move us, as long

as Mr. Judson didn't object to our being here."

"That'll do for you," muttered Bill, as he shuffled away.

"Did you catch the horse and win the five dollars?" inquired Jerry, referring to the countryman's fractious steed that ran away.

Bill's only answer was a growl.

"Come on, let's get home and go to bed," suggested Bob.

"Take good care of those tools," warned Jerry. Ned promised to do so; and there the talk came to an end.

CHAPTER XV.

NED UNDER SUSPICION.

It was quite early in the morning some days later when Bob called at Jerry's house.

"Hello, Chunky!" greeted Jerry as he came to the door, having finished a bountiful breakfast. "What's up now?"

"Thought maybe you might like to take a ride off in the country," replied the stout youth, panting a bit from having to push his motor up the little incline leading to his chum's front door.

"Nothing would suit me better," said the male representative of the Hopkins family. "Where is it to this time?"

"What do you say to a trip over to Limestone Creek? We can go fishing.

"I'm with you. Ned will go, of course?"

"Yes, he is waiting."

Mrs. Slade, on Ned's request, had the cook put up a basket of bread and butter, some cake and cheese, which Bob fastened to his machine. Then,

the fishing tackle having been stowed away on Jerry's motor the three chums started off.

Limestone Creek was a stream about ten miles from Cresville. It was a noted fishing place, and many a fat chub or speckled trout had been pulled from the sparkling waters. It was a hot August day, but the boys did not mind the burning rays of the sun. Part of the way they rode along under big trees that gave a refreshing shade, and occasionally there was a little breeze to cool them off.

"Here we are," cried Jerry at length as he turned his machine from the main road, into a narrow path that led through a green field to the brook. "This way to the fishing banks!"

"Yes, and if you yell that way all the fish will be scared away," expostulated Ned. "Make a little less noise if you want any luck."

"Good idea," chimed in Bob. He soon had the lines in shape, and then, taking out his knife, cut a slim willow pole that would serve excellently for fishing. The others followed his example, and soon all three were sitting on the grassy bank, while the cork floats bobbed lightly in the swirl of the eddy which formed the "old fishing hole."

Luck was good with the young disciples of Isaak Walton, and they soon had a dozen choice fish

among them. Then, as the sun was high in the sky, and it was hot sitting on the bank, the boys adjourned to the shade of the tree where they had left their cycles.

"Now for dinner!" cried Bob.

"Let's draw lots to see who makes the fire, who cleans the fish and who cooks them," suggested Ned.

Ten minutes later an appetizing aroma filled the summer air.

"Ah! Maybe that ain't good!" cried Bob.

"Beats restaurants all to pieces!" was Ned's opinion.

Then with the bread and butter they had brought along, with the seasoning for the fish, fresh crullers and cheese, the whole washed down with water from a clear cool spring near by, the boys made a meal that even a king might have envied.

Dinner over they lolled lazily beneath the trees until the sun was low in the west. Bob proposed a walk along the creek as he wanted to see if there were any evidences of musk-rats nests in a certain place.

"Will it be safe to leave the machines here?" asked Jerry. "Some one might come along and ride off with them."

"It would take more than one person to get

away with all three," Bob said. "But we can take out the spark plugs, and unless the thieves have duplicates along they won't get very far."

Removing the plugs, the boys walked along the stream for half a mile. They found no musk-rats nests, and Bob, remarking that they could come back another day and make a better search, proposed a return trip.

It did not take long to reach the places where they had left their machines. The spark plugs were put back, and, after finishing what few crullers remained, the three boys trundled their motors out into the path.

"Here goes for home!" cried Ned, as he vaulted into his saddle. He got his cycle started by foot power and then attempted to throw the power on. Nothing but a faint sound of air being exhausted from the cylinders responded.

"Something's wrong!" cried the boy.

At the same time the other two discovered that their machines would not work. Again and again they tried but with no result.

"Some one has cut the wires!" exclaimed Bob. "You can see where they split the insulation, shoved it to one side, broke the copper, and then put the insulation back to cover up the mean trick."

"You're right!" exclaimed Ned. "I'd like to catch the fellow who did it."

Suddenly Jerry darted over toward the tree beneath which the cycles had been standing. He stooped down and picked up something which he looked at closely.

"I fancy this will give us a clue," he said, showing a knife with an opened blade, to which there clung some of the insulation from the copper wires.

"Whose is it?" asked Bob.

"It has the initials N. N. on it," replied Jerry.

"And there's only one person around here who has a name with those letters," put in Bob.

"There might be more," said Jerry, inclined to be cautious, "but I happen to remember that Noddy Nixon had a knife like this. I saw him use it once."

"This is his first move in getting square, as he would call it," ventured Ned.

"Still it is only circumstantial evidence against him," reasoned Bob. "And we had better have more before we accuse him."

"Of course," agreed Ned. "I think —"

"Which of you boys happens to be Ned Slade?" interrupted a voice, and the boys turned to see a short, stout fussy man gravely regarding them.

"Ah, I thought so," he remarked as Ned gave an involuntary start. "Then you are the one I want to see."

"What for?" asked the owner of the name.

"Well — er — I don't like to speak of it in public."

"I haven't anything to conceal," spoke Ned.

"Then if you haven't I haven't," said the little man. "I'm Sheriff Blackwell of Peterstown, and I want to talk to you about a robbery."

"What! Not the robbery of Mr. Judson's mill?" asked Ned, greatly excited. "Why I —"

"Now I may as well warn you right now, that whatever you say will be used against you," said the sheriff. "Now that I've done my duty in giving the warning, go ahead if you want to."

"But you — you — why you surely don't think I robbed the mill?" asked Ned, flushing with shame at the thought.

"Very good, but you can't get anything out of me, young man," said the sheriff with a wise nod. "I cut my eye teeth years ago. You'll have to come with me, at least for a while. I reckon you can get bail."

"Bail! Come with you! What do you mean?" asked Ned, while his two chums stood looking on, not knowing what to do.

"Look here," began the fussy little sheriff. "You were at the mill on the night of the robbery, weren't you?"

"I — er — that is I was — er —"

"Of course," said the sheriff. "I knew you were. And you never said anything about it when we were hunting for clues, did you?"

"I told my two chums, Jerry and Bob, here," said Ned.

"That's right," chimed in Jerry, and Bob nodded his head in assent.

"I'm acting on information and belief," went on the sheriff. "Certain knowledge has come to me from a man who saw you at the mill on the night of the robbery. It looks as if you might know something about it, that is, who did it, and who has the money. I might add that suspicion points strongly to you."

"To me?"

"Yes. Can you give us any clue that would indicate that some one else might be involved?"

Ned hesitated an instant. He looked quickly at Jerry, who shook his head slightly, to indicate to Ned to have nothing to say about having seen Noddy.

"I can't give you any information," said Ned slowly.

"Then you'll have to come with me," went on the sheriff.

"May I ask," inquired Ned, "who told you that I might be the guilty person?"

"A gentleman of Cresville, named William Berry."

"Bill Berry!" exclaimed Ned. "I—" and then he stopped.

"I didn't lose any time," the representative of the law continued. "I drove over from Peterstown this morning. By judicious inquiries I learned you and two other boys had come over here. I followed. The law knows no delays. Are you ready to come?"

"I have my motor cycle with me," said Ned. "Can I go on that?"

"If I let you ride your machine will you promise to go slow, and not try to escape? I'll drive along in my carriage."

"I'll promise," said Ned, the deep flush not having left his face.

"Then we'll consider that arranged. Come on."

Slowly, and in depressed spirits, greatly in contrast to the gaiety with which they had arrived, the three boys trundled their machines, the wires of which had been quickly repaired, to the road.

The sheriff untied his horse, got in the carriage, and cautioning Ned to run his machine at reduced speed, followed the boys who felt very little inclined for talk. They were so worried that they left their fish behind.

Eventually Cresville was reached. Ned, much as he was humiliated by his technical arrest, knew he could easily prove his innocence. But he felt that the mystery of the mill robbery was deepening.

"I'll go right to your house with you," said the sheriff to Ned. "We will have a talk with your father, and I have no doubt we can come to some understanding."

Mr. Slade was surprised, incensed and puzzled by turns when the fussy little sheriff in charge of Ned called on him. The arm and majesty of the law soon explained what had taken place.

"This Mr. Berry is sure he saw your son at the mill," repeated the sheriff.

"I wouldn't depend too much on Berry's word," said the merchant.

"I was at the mill that night," exclaimed Ned. Then he related what he had seen, all about the queer light, the presence of Bill Berry, and the finding of the tools and dark lantern. He only refrained from mentioning Noddy's name, since he

did not feel justified in bringing him in, no matter what his suspicions were concerning the bully.

"Great Snakes and little fishes!" exclaimed the sheriff, when Ned had finished. "I wish I had known this at the time. I guess we'll have to hold you, as a witness, at least, my boy."

But Ned's father had sufficient standing in the town to render unnecessary any formal proceedings in holding Ned, and the sheriff departed without his one-time prisoner, on Ned's promise to give evidence when wanted.

CHAPTER XVI.

PLANS FOR A MOTOR-CYCLE RACE.

"WELL, Ned," said Mr. Slade when the sheriff had gone, "you came close to getting into trouble. Why didn't you mention to me something about seeing the light in the mill."

"I thought of it," replied the boy, "but after I talked it over with Bob and Jerry we decided it was better not to say anything about it. Besides, I haven't told all yet."

"What? Is there more to tell?"

"Yes. I saw some one besides Bill Berry at the mill that night."

"Who?"

"Noddy Nixon," and then Ned told of meeting Noddy with the box of bait, as the bully had called it. He also related what the three boys had planned to do in keeping watch of Noddy, and of the odd bank bill.

"I think it would have been wise to tell some older person of all this," commented Mr. Slade. "Still I appreciate that you did not want to cast

suspicion on any one. And, as you say, it is only a vague suspicion as yet. Noddy may be as innocent as you. I would like to know more of this Bill Berry."

"He knows who robbed the mill," said Ned.

"What makes you think so?"

"Because he was looking right in the office door when the light was visible."

"If he knew why should he cast suspicion on you?"

"I don't know, unless it is to draw attention from some one else."

"You mean Noddy?"

Ned nodded his head affirmatively.

"Think no more about it; at least for the present," advised Mr. Slade. "I will see to the legal end of it, and take care you are not again annoyed by the sheriff unless it is necessary to give evidence. I would urge you and your two chums to keep quiet about this."

The boy promised, and both Bob and Jerry agreed to say nothing of the latest development in the mill robbery mystery when Ned had told them of the outcome of the sheriff's act.

For several days after this it was so hot that the boys stayed quietly at home instead of taking trips on their machines. Toward the end of the

week, however, there came several heavy thunder showers that cooled the air, laid the dust, and made traveling pleasant. It was on Saturday afternoon that the three chums went for another short spin.

Coming back they stopped at the Athletic club house. Leaving their wheels in charge of the caretaker they went to the refreshment room to have some soda and ice cream.

"I say, what's this?" exclaimed Ned, catching sight of a large notice fastened on the wall. "Come here Chunky and Jerry. This looks as if it was meant for us."

Rapidly the three boys read an announcement that the Cresville club had decided to hold a grand motor cycle meet, open to competitors of all classes and all makes of machines, not over two cylinders in size. There were to be three prizes. The first was to be optional with the winner and of the value of two thousand dollars, the second one thousand dollars and the third five hundred dollars. Articles worth these amounts would be given, it was stated, and entries would be received until within a week of the race, which was to be on September 20.

"What do you think of that, Chunky?" asked Ned.

"It seems to hit us in the right spot," replied the heavy-weight youth. "I'm going to enter."

"So am I," came from Ned and Jerry in a chorus.

"Wouldn't it be great if one of us could win the first prize?" inquired Jerry. "Think of getting something worth two thousand dollars."

"I wonder what I'd take if I won?" asked Bob of no one in particular.

"I think we have as good a chance of winning as any one," proceeded Jerry.

"I don't doubt it," agreed Ned.

"Then let's agree," and Jerry's face was serious, "that if any of us captures that first prize we'll select an automobile touring car."

"An automobile?" exclaimed Ned.

"A touring car?" cried Bob.

"Certainly. Why not? Isn't that better than a horse, or a motor boat? Think what it would mean. We could travel all over,— make a tour of the United States perhaps. Yes, sir, that's the ticket! If we win let's get a touring car. What do you say, boys?"

For a few seconds the very audacity of the idea seemed to stagger Ned and Bob. They gradually recovered, and their eyes shone as they realized the possibilities of the plan.

"We'll do it!" exclaimed Ned.

"That's what we will!" asserted Bob.

"Then all we have to do is to go in and win that first prize," concluded Jerry. "We must begin practice at once."

"And there isn't the least doubt but what you'll win," exclaimed a mocking voice suddenly.

The boys turned, to behold Noddy Nixon grinning at them.

"Not the least in the world," went on the bully in tantalizing tones. "In fact I don't see why they hold any contest at all. The club might as well give you boys all three prizes. It would save a lot of work."

"Look here —," began Bob, but Ned placed a quieting hand on his shoulder.

"Don't reply to him," said Ned. "It may make trouble."

"You think because you won a little race a while ago that you can go in a big one," went on Noddy. "But you'll find that this is a different matter."

"I suppose you're going to enter?" asked Jerry.

"Is it any of your business if I do?" inquired Noddy.

"None at all," replied Jerry. "Only if you do decide to start in the races you might find this

handy, in case you had to cut any wires, you know," and he handed Noddy the knife with the initials N. N. that the boys had found the day their cycles were disabled in the field.

"What's that?" asked Noddy, not seeing at first what it was that Jerry held toward him.

"It's a knife that I think belongs to you," said Jerry. "It has been used to cut wires with," he went on, "and it may come in handy for that purpose again."

"I don't know what you mean," Noddy responded, but a deep blush dyed his face and he looked very uncomfortable.

"Then you don't care to claim this?" asked Jerry as he saw Noddy turn aside.

"It isn't mine; why should I?" Noddy asked in turn, though the boys knew he was telling an untruth.

"Very well," Jerry said, replacing the knife in his pocket as Noddy hurried from the room.

"He's a cool one," commented Ned.

"That's what he is," assented Bob. "If he only knew all we know he would act differently."

"But it's not time to say anything yet," counseled Jerry. "We must go slow."

The boys resumed their talk about the coming motor cycle races. They discussed the questions

from all sides, and decided that, accidents excepted, they had at any rate as good a chance of winning, at least one of the prizes, as any one else.

"We'll form a community of interests," said Bob. "We'll race separately, but whoever wins pledges himself to get a touring automobile, if one can be had for the amount of the prize, and share it with the others. Is that a go?"

"It is," said Jerry.

"Every time, as far as I am concerned," was Ned's answer.

CHAPTER XVII.

CAUGHT IN THE STORM.

"We ought to begin our training for the motor cycle race soon," said Jerry one morning, when he stopped at Ned's house, coming back from the post-office.

"I guess you're right," Ned assented. "I think a few good long trips on the road as a starter would be a fine thing. What we need most is an endurance run, for that's what will count in the twenty-five mile race that we are going to compete in."

"I was thinking of that myself," Jerry remarked. "What would you say to a pretty long trip, say one hundred miles? We could run to Huntsville, which is about sixty miles from here as I figure it, stay there all night, and come back the next day. That would give us good practice."

"Sounds as if it might do," was Ned's opinion. "Let's go over and talk to Bob about it."

Eight o'clock the next morning saw them assembled in Bob's yard, for it had been agreed to

start from his house. The last touches were given the machines and, at a signal from Jerry, the trip was begun.

"Where are we going to stop for dinner?" asked Bob, when they had been riding about an hour.

"There he goes," said Jerry in a pretended complaining voice. "I never did see such a fellow! You'd think he was all stomach."

"Why," began Ned soberly, "Jerry and I had about made up our minds that we'd go without dinner. It will be good training and you need it you know, Chunky."

"Oh!" groaned the stout youth. "Oh dear! If I had known that I wouldn't have come along. I can't go without my dinner."

There was silence for a little while, broken now and again by a deep sigh from Bob. Jerry and Ned had all they could do to keep from laughing, but they managed to keep their faces serious.

"Let's speed up a bit," suggested the stout boy, after a time.

"What for?" asked Ned.

"Dinner time will come and pass quicker then," explained the hungry one. "Maybe we won't notice it at all. But I surely will be glad when supper time comes."

"No, we agreed to run slowly," Jerry remarked, "and we must stick to our plan."

Bob sighed but said nothing. On and on they rode, along pleasant highways, under big shady trees, up hill and down dale. At last, when the sun was almost at the zenith, they came to the top of a hill that led down into a pretty valley.

In the centre of the vale, which was surrounded on all sides by green wooded hills, nestled a village.

"That's the town of Montville," said Jerry. "We are half way to Huntsville now."

"Are we going to stop here?" asked Bob, a note of hope coming into his voice.

"What for?" inquired Ned, winking at Jerry.

"I — er — thought — er — we —" began Bob.

"Own up! It was dinner you were thinking of, now wasn't it Chunky?"

"Yes, it was," admitted Bob in desperation.

Jerry and Ned laughed outright.

"I don't see anything so very funny," exclaimed Bob, who was not in the best of humor. "If you had the appetite I have you wouldn't want to laugh."

By this time the boys had reached the village and were riding through the streets. People

turned to stare at them, but the chums were used to that by this time. They steered past a hotel.

"Ah! Um! Doesn't that smell good!" cried Ned, tilting his nose high in the air and sniffing vigorously. "I'll bet they have ham and eggs!"

"Just what I was wishing for," groaned Bob. "I'm going to have my dinner, training or no training, race or no race," and, with a determined look he got off his machine.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" laughed Bob's two chums.

"I wondered how much longer we could keep up the joke," Jerry said, when he had ceased chuckling. "You were easy, Chunky."

"Then we are going to have dinner?" asked Bob, all his ill humor gone.

"That's just what we are, Chunky, my boy!" exclaimed Jerry. "We were only fooling you."

They all sat down to a bountifully spread table a little later, and Ned and Jerry were almost sorry for the anguish they had caused their chum, when they saw, by the quantity of ham and eggs he consumed, how really hungry he had been.

Dinner over, the three boys sat about on the hotel piazza for an hour. They were plied with questions as to the working of their machines by about a score of boys and youths who had gathered to see the motors operated, Jerry kindly went

into details and entertained the little audience for some time.

"Well, I think we'd better be going," said Jerry to his chums at length. "It's two o'clock and we can just about reach Huntsville by night."

"You're goin' t' git ketched in a storm," said the hotel keeper.

"Think so?" inquired Jerry.

"I know it." The man pointed to where a bank of dark clouds were accumulating in the west. "Thunder storm coming as sure as guns is guns."

"Well, we'll ride on, and if we have to take to shelter I guess we can find it," Jerry said. "We don't mind a little rain. We're out for practice."

"Well, good luck to ye," called the hotel man after the three boys, as they rode down the village street. "Stop in agin when ye're in this direction."

For a time it seemed as if the prediction of the storm was not going to be verified. The bank of clouds grew no larger, and the sun still shone. The boys speeded up a bit as they struck a stretch of good road.

"Hark! What was that?" asked Ned.

"Sounded like thunder," replied Jerry.

There was no doubt of it a minute later, for the distant rumble of the sky-artillery could easily be

distinguished. The wind, which had died away, began to blow stronger, and the clouds spread over the heavens and were blacker.

"It won't break for half an hour," was Ned's opinion. "We can ride on through a little rain, but if it gets too bad we can turn into some barn."

In less than fifteen minutes the first drops splashed down. The rumble of thunder grew louder, and there were vivid spurts and tongues of lightning leaping across the black vapor masses.

Crack! sounded a report so loud that it seemed as if lightning had struck near by. For a moment there was no apparent increase in the fury of the storm. Then came a flash so bright that it seemed as if the whole heavens had been lighted up. It was followed by a terrifying crash that fairly shook the earth, and then came a deluge of water that almost hid the three boys one from another as it poured down from the clouds.

"We'd better get out of this!" cried Jerry. "It seems to be getting worse. Put on full speed! I saw a house a little way ahead. We'll stop there until this is over!"

Ned and Bob could just hear Jerry through the noise the storm made, though the boy was shouting at the top of his voice.

The storm was at its height now. The light-

ning seemed incessant, and the thunder claps followed one after the other so closely that it was a continual roar. The wind was a regular gale, driving the rain with stinging force into the faces of the riders.

"Here we are!" yelled Jerry presently. "Turn in!"

Dimly through the rain Ned and Bob could see their chum steering through a drive-way alongside of a white house on the left of the highway. They followed him, and soon found themselves in front of a barn, to which the drive-way led.

"Hurry up inside!" Jerry called. "And bring the machines in with you!"

The motors were stopped and three drenched boys trundled them into the shelter of the barn, the doors of which Jerry had found unlocked, and had managed to open.

"Whew! This is a storm!" exclaimed Ned, wiping the water from his eyes.

"Storm! I should say so — terrible — fearful! Worst one in twenty-one years! Hundreds of people struck! Houses burned! Barns blown over! Awful! Awful! Hello! Bob, Ned and Jerry! Where'd you come from? Glad to see you — come in — shut the door — get up in the hay and dry off — this is the worst ever!" and

then the voice, that had uttered all this in one breath stopped, and the three chums who had started in surprise as the torrent of words began, turned to behold their friend Andy Rush.

"Well, how in the world did you get here?" asked Jerry, taking off his cap and wringing the water from it.

"On a visit — my Aunt Jane lives here — nice lady — she'll be glad to see you — lots to eat — I'm having a fine time — came out here to feed the horse — storm came up — I didn't want to get wet — say how'd you get here?"

"The same old Andy," murmured Ned to Bob. "He'll beat the storm for wind."

"We were going to Huntsville on our motors," Jerry explained, "and we got caught in the deluge. Do you suppose your aunt will mind if we stay here a while?"

"Not a bit — glad to have you — Whoop! That was a cracker — bet it struck the house!" cried Andy, as a louder clap of thunder than usual fairly shook the barn.

Andy ran to the door and peered through a crack in the direction of the house.

"Nope, it's all right," he called, in a sort of disappointed tone. "No damage done — but say — I'm glad you happened to strike this place —

how's things in Cresville? I've been here a week — fishing — riding horses — milking cows — lots of fun — can't you stay a few days — I know a dandy place to fish — catch big suckers — chub — Aunt Jane will give you lots to eat — whoop!"

Andy could not seem to keep still. He hurried around in the barn, and, to give vent to his feelings he crawled up on a high beam, and jumped down in a big pile of hay.

The three chums were laughing so they could hardly speak. When they ceased Jerry thanked Andy for the invitation, but said they had made other plans.

"But you can stay all night," suggested Andy, calming down a bit. "The roads will be bad after this storm. You can go to Huntsville in the morning. It's only ten miles from here."

The idea appealed to the boys. The storm showed no signs of stopping, and they knew it would be impossible to go on while it lasted. As Andy had said, they could proceed in the morning, and there was no special need of reaching Huntsville anyhow, except that they wanted to carry out the arrangements they had made, and make a trip of over a hundred miles.

The evening was pleasantly spent in talking, singing and playing games. Andy's uncle wanted

the three chums to remain over a day or two, but, though they thanked him for the invitation they decided to push on the next morning, complete their schedule trip, and then return home.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A LEAP FOR LIFE.

"HURRAH!" cried Andy the next morning, bursting into the room where the three chums had slept. "Hurrah! It's a fine day! Rain all stopped — sun shines — sorry to see you fellows go — come again!"

"Take it easy," advised Jerry. "We're very much obliged to you, Andy, for providing this fine shelter for us. Wish you were going along."

"So do I — can't though — got to stay here another week — help run the farm — maybe I'll be a farmer some day — whoop!"

In spite of the storm, which had been an unusually severe one, the roads were in fairly good shape. Now and then a stretch would be reached where speed had to be slackened but, by picking their way, the machines were pushed along at a good rate. Huntsville was reached in about two hours, and the boys left their machines in charge of a store keeper while they walked about the town viewing the sights.

There was not much to be seen, and they had come more for the sake of saying they had ridden the distance than from any other reason. Purchasing a few souvenirs for the folks at home, and buying some sandwiches in case they might not find a convenient eating place, the boys prepared for the return trip.

"We'll take a little different way on our back trip," said Jerry. "I know a road that goes past a fine waterfall that's worth seeing."

The falls were about fifty feet high, and, with the jagged rocks over which the water flowed, and the trees on either side, made a picture well worth beholding.

The boys stopped for half an hour, watching the leaping, falling water, which possessed a peculiar fascination. Then, as they still had most of their trip before them, Jerry suggested they had better start.

They had not yet turned into the road leading to Cresville, from which they had diverged in order to visit the falls, when riding along a rather lonely stretch of the highway, the boys came in sight of a white house, with no other residences near it. As they came opposite a man suddenly ran from the front door. He seemed greatly excited.

"Stop!" he called to the boys. "Stop, for Heaven's sake."

There was so much anguish in his tone that the boys knew something must have happened.

"What is it?" asked Jerry, riding up to the front gate and dismounting.

"It's my wife! She has just been taken very sick and I'm all alone here. I need a doctor, but I dare not leave her to get one, and I have no one to send. I saw you coming down the road and I thought maybe you would help me!"

"Of course we will," replied Jerry heartily. "Where does the doctor live? I'll ride after him."

"His house is about two miles from here," said the man. "It's the first one after you cross the white bridge. Oh! Hurry, and tell him to be quick! I'm afraid my wife is dying! Tell him to come to Mr. Johnson's! Oh! What shall I do!" and the unfortunate man showed so much distress that the hearts of the boys were touched.

"Don't worry," Jerry advised. "I'll make good time. Ned and Bob will stay with you. Maybe they will be of some help."

Springing into the saddle, Jerry started his machine and soon had it going at a good rate. Because of the condition of the roads, which were not

in the best of shape, he dared not push the motor to the limit. Ned and Bob followed the man into the house, willing to do what they could.

Meanwhile Jerry rode on. A turn of the road soon hid the lonely farm house from sight. The grade was up hill for a way, and the machine did not make such good time.

"I must hurry," reasoned the boy. "I hope I find the doctor at home."

In a few minutes Jerry had come to the top of the hill. At the foot of the slope, which was about half a mile in extent, the boy saw a white bridge, that spanned a narrow but swift running stream.

"Here goes!" cried Jerry. He was about to coast at half speed down the hill when a voice suddenly called:

"Stop!"

"I can't!" shouted back Jerry. "I'm hurrying for the doctor!"

The boy turned to see who had warned him, and saw a farmer hurrying across the field toward him. Something in his manner caused Jerry to dismount.

"You can't get across the bridge!" cried the man. "It's broken. If you ride down that hill you'll be killed! I stopped you just in time!"

Jerry felt his heart sink.

"The rains made the creek rise," explained the man. "The farther span of the bridge was carried away last night. There's a sign just this side of it warning people, but if you rode down on that lickity-split thing I knew you'd never see the sign until it was too late."

"I'm much obliged to you," said Jerry. "But I must cross that stream. A lady back there," pointing in the direction he had come, "is dying. I'm after the doctor."

"That's bad," said the man. "But I don't see how you're going to do it."

"Is the missing span of the bridge too wide for me to jump across?" asked Jerry, a sudden idea coming into his head.

"It's fifteen feet," replied the man. "That's too much for you I reckon. And if you didn't make it you'd be killed, for the current is very swift, and the creek is full of rocks."

"Can't we get planks and bridge the gap?" asked the boy in desperation. "Something must be done."

"I'm on my way to get men to mend the break now," the man said. "But it will take some time."

"Isn't there another bridge near here?"

"Not one within five miles either way," was the answer. "I'm very sorry, my boy. Is the sick woman any relation of yours?"

"No, her husband stopped me as I was riding past the house with my two chums, and begged us to hurry after a doctor."

"Well, I'll go after some planks," said the man, "but it may take two hours to get 'em here. I'll have to hunt for 'em."

Slowly Jerry rode his motor down to the white structure that spanned the now swollen and swiftly running stream. As the man had said the last span of the bridge, on the side farthest from Jerry, had been carried away. It was the part which had extended from the shore to the stone abutment.

The boy carefully examined the ruined bridge. There were planks on the floor, but they were firmly spiked down, and none of them seemed long enough. To leap the gap was a feat beyond Jerry's ability, though a professional jumper might have done it.

"If the stream wasn't so swift I could swim it," the boy murmured. "But it's too risky. Besides, even if I get over, I wonder how the doctor is to come back? Though I guess I can manage that. He can bring some planks with him, and

walk over on them. That part will be all right if I can only get across."

But Jerry had to admit that the problem was a difficult one to solve. He looked at the bridge with sorrow in his heart as he thought of the man waiting anxiously for the doctor.

"I simply must get across!" exclaimed the boy.

As he walked to the edge of the structure, looking in vain for a plank that would serve, Jerry noticed a strange trick that the water had played. In tearing away the far span the timbers that remained resting on the stone abutment had been loosened. This caused the middle of what was left of the bridge **to sag,** or dip down to considerable degree.

All at once a daring thought came to Jerry. He looked at the sagging bridge, at the gap where the span was missing, and at the angry waters that swirled between him and the other shore. Then he turned and looked back at the hill which came to an end right at the bridge.

"I have it!" cried the boy, his eyes shining with excitement. "If I only dare do it! I will do it!"

He hurried back to where he had left his motor cycle. He started it in motion and rode slowly back up the hill which he had just descended.

Any one seeing him, and not knowing his plan might have thought he had given up in despair. But Jerry was not that kind of a boy.

When he looked at the broken and sagging bridge he had suddenly thought of a trick he had seen performed in a circus that had exhibited in Cresville. This was where a man on a bicycle had started down a steep incline of boards to accomplish what was billed as "A Leap For Life!" The incline was broken about three-quarters of the way down, making a gap. Just before the gap was reached there was a dip, or curve in the incline. Across the gap the incline was continued at a slight angle.

The principle on which the feat was performed was, that the man on the bicycle, rushing down the incline, would get momentum enough to shoot across the gap. To prevent the wheel and rider from falling from the attraction of gravitation while it was flying across the space, the end of the incline was curved upward. This served to shoot the machine and man into the air, and overcame, for the time necessary to speed across the gap, the pull of the earth.

And, in a crude way, Jerry saw before him all the elements that went to make up the trick as it is performed in many circuses.

The hill made the incline. The sag in the middle of the bridge, and the little rise at the further abutment, gave the necessary upward curve that would throw Jerry and his motor far enough into the air to prevent him tumbling into the stream. The missing span was the gap corresponding to the one in the inclined plane of boards, and the road on the farther shore would make a good landing place.

"I guess I can do it as well as that man in the circus!" exclaimed Jerry. "It's a risk, I know, but I can't stay here and wait two hours for that man to bring the planks."

He was soon at the top of the hill. He looked around to see if any one was in sight to aid him in case he failed. But the roads were deserted.

"I must put on full speed," thought the boy. "I'll need all the momentum I can get."

He turned his machine to face down the slope. For a moment he hesitated as he looked at what was before him. But, steeling his heart, and uttering a short prayer, he leaped into the saddle.

"Here I go!" thought Jerry. He turned the motor to full speed, and soon was racing down the hill at a fearful pace. "There's no stopping now!" he murmured.

How the wind sang in his ears! The motor

fairly hummed beneath him, and the big tires threw up a shower of mud. On and on rushed the boy! Nearer and nearer he came to the broken bridge. He heard a shout behind him but he dared not turn to see who it was.

He was twenty feet from the spot where the road ended and the bridge began. He wanted to shut his eyes, but he knew he must guide the motor with a firm and steady hand. He gripped the steering bars with all his might. There was a whizz as the rubber tires struck the wooden planking of the bridge. Jerry felt himself going down as he reached the sagging middle of the broken structure.

Then, like a stone fired from some ancient catapult, he felt his machine rise under him, shoot up into the air, and sail across the gap.

For one instant Jerry looked down at the black swirling waters below him. Then with a terrific thud he felt himself land on the road across the missing span.

He had made the leap for life and succeeded!

So swiftly was the machine going that even the shock of the landing in the road beyond the broken bridge did not check it. On and on it rushed until Jerry, whose breath had been almost shaken from him by the concussion, turned off the power.

"But I must not stop!" cried the boy. "I'm safely across, and I've got to get the doctor!"

So turning on the power again he sent the motor flying down the road. Three-quarters of a mile further he came to the first house. There was a sign on it:

DR. JOHN RAND.

"Is the doctor in?" gasped Jerry, barely able to stand as he leaped from his machine and rang the bell which was answered by a woman.

"Yes, right in his office," was the answer.

"Tell him he's wanted at once! Mrs. Johnson is dying!"

"But I can't get across the bridge; it is broken," said Dr. Rand, who had come from his office in time to hear Jerry's message.

"I got across," exclaimed the boy. "Quick, doctor! You must hurry! Take a long plank along and you can get over the gap!"

"But if I did get across, how am I to get my horse over? He can't walk a plank," objected the medicine man. "It will take a long time for me to walk to Mrs. Johnson's."

Once more it looked as if Jerry had failed.

CHAPTER XIX.

JERRY AND THE DOCTOR.

"I DON'T see how I can get there in time to be of any service," Dr. Rand went on. "I'll start and walk of course."

"I have a better plan!" cried Jerry suddenly. "Hitch up your horse, and bring two planks along."

"But, my boy, you can't get a horse and carriage across on two narrow planks."

"I'm not going to try," responded Jerry. "Please do as I say, doctor. We must lose no time. Get the planks and hitch up, please. I'll get you over the bridge."

Soon the rig was ready. The boards stuck out ahead and behind the carriage, in which the doctor seated himself with his driver. While the boy rode his machine to the bridge the doctor urged the horse to a gallop, and soon the structure was reached.

"Now what is your plan, Jerry?"

"I'll show you, sir. Quick, get out the planks and lay them over the gap."

The driver soon had the two boards in position. They formed a narrow and not very steady temporary bridge over where the black water showed below the missing span.

"Can you walk across, doctor?" inquired Jerry.

"I guess so, my head is pretty steady," was the reply.

"Then cross, and I'll follow with my machine," said the boy.

It took the doctor but a few seconds to cross the planks, carrying his medicine case. Then Jerry, pushing his machine on one plank, and walking on the other, joined the physician.

"Tell your driver to come back for you in about two hours," suggested Jerry. "If the lady is going to get better I guess you can safely leave by that time."

"Well, you seem to have the matter all planned," said the doctor smiling, as he called the order to his driver. "But still I don't see how I am to get to Mrs. Johnson's unless I walk."

"You're going on my motor cycle," said Jerry. "You can stand on the back step, and hold on to me. This machine will carry two."

"All right," agreed the physician. "I must take the risk, I guess."

"Well, you won't be taking any more of a risk than that youngster did, doc," interrupted a voice, and the man who had warned Jerry came up. He had several planks with him.

"I watched him shoot across that gap," he went on, "and it made me shiver. I thought sure he'd be killed. I hollored at him to wait, as I had some planks, but I guess he didn't hear me."

"I heard somebody, but I couldn't stop," Jerry said.

"And do you mean to say you leaped across that missing span?" asked the doctor.

"That's what he done, doc," said the man. "It was as nervy a thing as I ever seen, and I never seen it outside of a circus."

"It wasn't anything," said Jerry modestly. "I had to get across, and that was the only way. But we are wasting time. Come on, doctor."

So, with a nervous dread in his heart, the physician got on the rear step, and clasped Jerry about the shoulders.

"Give us a start," Jerry asked of the countryman, for the boy found it hard to pedal the machine up grade with the added weight of his passenger.

The shove gave the motor start enough so that Jerry could turn on the power, and then he rode off, bearing the much-needed physician. In a comparatively short time they reached the Johnson house.

"Oh, I'm so glad you came, doctor!" exclaimed the woman's husband. "I'm afraid you're too late though."

"We'll see," said the physician cheerfully, as he dismounted from the rather uncomfortable step and hurried into the house.

While the doctor found that Mrs. Johnson was in much pain and suffering, he soon discovered that she was not in danger of immediate death, though her symptoms were alarming enough to cause herself and her husband much fear. The physician was able to afford some relief, and in about an hour the woman was much better, and, so the physician said, on the road to recovery.

"But I only got here just in time," the physician remarked. "If she had suffered from such great pain much longer it would have weakened her heart so that the results might have been serious. You owe a great deal to this brave boy, Mr. Johnson. Only for him, and for his ingenuity in getting me here, the case might have had a different ending."

"I realize that," said the man, "and I can't thank him enough. The other two boys aided me also. I don't know what I would have done without them. They helped me heat water and in other ways. I am sure I'll never forget it."

After seeing that his patient was as comfortable as possible the physician said he would return home.

"I'll send you as far as the bridge in a carriage," proposed Mr. Johnson. "That is if one of these boys can drive you and bring the rig back. I don't feel like leaving Mrs. Johnson yet."

"I'll drive," volunteered Ned.

So he hitched up a horse and soon the doctor was ready to go, saying he would call again the next day.

"You boys had better stay here all night," invited Mr. Johnson. "I'll be glad to have you, and it's so late now you can't get to Cresville."

"What will our folks say?" asked Bob. "You know they might worry if we didn't come home."

"There is a telegraph station not far from my house," put in Dr. Rand. "A message can be sent to Cresville from there."

So it was arranged. Ned drove the doctor back, and found that in the meantime the bridge had been repaired so that the passage was safer,

though a horse could not be driven over it. The physician promised to send the message to the boys' parents, and, leaving Ned, Dr. Rand walked across the planks, got in his own carriage and drove home, while Ned made his way back to Mr. Johnson's.

The sick woman continued to improve and soon was much better. Mr. Johnson secured the services of some women neighbors who were brought to his house by Ned in the carriage, and arrangements were made for the boys to spend the night.

The next morning Mrs. Johnson was so much better that she insisted on sitting up and having a talk with the three boys, whose coming was so fortunate for her. She had high praise for them, especially for Jerry, who blushed like a girl.

"I hear you all come from Cresville," said Mrs. Johnson. "Isn't that where a mill was robbed not long ago?"

"Some one took one thousand dollars from Mr. Judson's place," answered Ned, wondering what was coming.

"I think the thieves must have got some of my money."

"Your money? What do you mean?" asked Ned. "I thought it was all Mr. Judson's."

"It was. I mean that I paid a bill at the mill the afternoon of the night the robbery took place.

Mr. Judson took my money, together with some other that he had in a box, and locked it all in the safe. It was quite late, and he said that he would not have time to go to the bank."

"Oh!" cried Ned. "Then some of the money you paid was taken, for it was the very money that Mr. Judson didn't take to the bank that was stolen."

"Then there ought to be a clue to the thief," went on Mrs. Johnson.

"How?" asked Jerry.

"Because with the money I paid was a queer looking bill," said the woman. "It was from some Massachusetts state bank, instead of a national note, and it had a funny mark on it."

"Do you remember what that mark was?" asked Ned, while the other boys waited in breathless silence.

"I remember it very well," said Mrs. Johnson. "There was a monogram of three letters. I recall them very distinctly because they were the initials of my brother's name. He is dead, so of course he could not have put them on the bill, but some one with the same initials did."

"And what were the letters?" asked Jerry.

"They were H. R. C," was the answer.

The boys, who recalled the initials on the queer

bill that Paul Banner had received from Noddy Nixon, were too startled to reply. They did not know what to say.

"That certainly ought to furnish a clue," said Jerry at length, making a sign to Ned and Bob to say nothing. "But the police do not know that; or, if they do, they have made nothing of it."

"I think I'll write and tell them," said Mrs. Johnson. "It seems a shame for Mr. Judson to lose all that money."

"Perhaps that would be a good plan," Jerry said quietly. "What was the value of the queer bill?"

"It was a ten dollar note," replied Mrs. Johnson.

After some further conversation the boys, finding there was nothing more they could do, decided they had better start for home. They were prevailed on, however, to remain for dinner and, shortly after that meal, the doctor having come in the meanwhile and pronouncing Mrs. Johnson out of danger, the three chums motored to Cresville, where they arrived at dusk.

CHAPTER XX.

CLOSING THE NET.

"WELL, things seem to be narrowing down," said Ned the next day, when he called on Jerry. "Rather odd, that information about the queer bank bill coming out, wasn't it?"

"It certainly was," agreed Jerry. "I want to get another look at the note Paul has. Suppose I hunt him up this afternoon?"

"Good idea," commented Ned.

Accordingly Jerry looked up the dapper Polly, and, after a general conversation, managed to turn the talk to odd coins and bank bills.

"Do you remember that queer bill you showed me one day, not long ago?" asked Jerry.

"I do," replied Paul.

"Have you got it yet?"

"No, my dear boy, I have not," answered Paul, lighting one of his perfumed Egyptian cigarettes.

"What — what did you do with it?" asked Jerry, fearing lest the clue he hoped for had gotten away from him.

"I—humph! That's queer, I forget now what I did do with it. Oh, yes! I remember now. Some young chap, a friend of yours I guess, asked me to sell it to him. He said he thought there was a premium on it. He gave me eleven dollars for it. I made one dollar, so I was satisfied. You know you said you were going to see if the bill had any value, but I guess you forgot it."

"I did, for a fact," said Jerry, sorry now he had not remembered to do as he had promised. "But who has the bill now?"

"I forget the boy's name I sold it to," Paul said in reply, "but he talks very fast, is always in a hurry, and doesn't seem to have time to breathe."

"Andy Rush, I'll bet a cooky," cried Jerry.

"That's the name. I thought first it was Andy Hurry, but I remember now, it was Rush. It's the same thing."

"Pretty nearly," agreed Jerry. "Well, I'll be going I guess."

In due time Andy Rush returned from his visit to his aunt. Jerry heard of his home-coming and soon hunted up the rapid chap.

"Did you get home all right?" burst out Andy as soon as he caught sight of Jerry. "My but

that was a storm — wish you could have stayed with me — I had jolly fun — the horse ran away with me — I got chased by a bull — fell in the ditch — sprained my wrist, and got kicked by a cow — whoop!"

"I say Andy," oroke in Jerry, anxious to get on the subject that interested him, "have you a queer bank bill that you got from Paul Banner?"

"I have!" exclaimed Andy. "I gave him a dollar extra for it. I thought it might be valuable — no go — bill is just like any other — no premium — I'm out a dollar — too bad!"

"I'll buy it from you for just what you gave for it," said Jerry eagerly. "I want it for a particular purpose. Will you sell it?"

"I sure will!" cried Andy. "I don't like to lose money — here it is — glad you spoke — I would have spent it in a week."

Jerry, who happened to have the necessary amount with him, passed eleven dollars over to Andy, and received the odd ten dollar note.

Bidding the boy who was always in a hurry a good-bye Jerry left. As soon as he was where he could not be observed he examined the bank note closely. It tallied exactly with the description given by Mrs. Johnson, just as Jerry had expected it would from his former view of it.

When Ned told his father of the latest developments Mr. Slade said he would take the matter under advisement. At his direction Jerry handed over the queer bill, Mr. Slade paying what the boy had expended for it.

"I will keep it," said the merchant, "until the time comes to use it. Meanwhile you boys had better say nothing about the matter."

It was three days later when the chums, having gone for a short ride on their motors, stopped one afternoon at a little wayside refreshment booth, where the proprietor had cakes, candy, ice cream and soda water for sale.

While the boys were eating their refreshments in the shade of a canvas awning the owner of the stand had put up, a horse and carriage, rapidly driven, passed along the road.

The driver pulled his beast up quickly as he came opposite the booth, and jumped out.

"Hi, Bill," he called to his companion, who was in the carriage. "Come here and we'll wet our whistle. I'm as dry as a chip."

"It's Noddy Nixon, and Bill Berry is with him!" exclaimed Jerry. "I hope they don't bother us."

"You're not afraid, are you?" asked Ned.

"Not a bit, but I don't want a row here."

Noddy did not appear to notice the three boys. He ordered some lemon soda in a blustering tone, and when he paid for it pulled out quite a roll of bills.

"Where'd you get all the money?" the boys heard Bill ask Noddy.

"Oh, I had a little and Jack Pender loaned me the rest," said Noddy with a laugh. "Jack's a soft mark. He'd give me all he had."

"I wish I could find some one as accommodating," said Bill with a chuckle, as he drained his glass.

"Come on!" cried Noddy. Then he cast a look over to where the chums were sitting. He started to walk toward them and seemed about to say something.

"Keep quiet!" the boys heard Bill advise Noddy, at the same time grasping him by the arm. "Don't raise a row with those cubs again. They know too much now!"

"All right!" growled Noddy. "I'd like to punch their heads, though."

Then he and Bill got in their carriage and drove away at a rapid pace.

"Punch our heads!" muttered Bob. "I'd like to see him try it. He's always talking of it. why doesn't he do it?"

"I guess he knows it wouldn't be healthy," said Jerry.

CHAPTER XXI.

PRACTICE FOR THE RACE.

"We must begin track work," said Jerry one afternoon, when the three chums, having been out on a spin, stopped beneath the shade of a road-side tree. "A week from to-day the races take place."

"I think we are all in pretty good trim, and so are the machines," ventured Bob.

"That part's all right, Chunky," came from Ned, "but what we want is track work, as Jerry says. Nothing like getting right on the ground. Besides, we have been speeding on a wide road, where we have all the room we want. It will be different when there are twenty riders on a narrow track, each one wanting to get inside."

Ned and Bob agreed that it would be the very thing needed. Accordingly the next morning, early, saw the three boys at the track of the Cresville Athletic Club. Though it was little more than eight o'clock the chums found about a dozen riders with their motors "warming-up" on the

banked oval. The explosions of the numerous gasolene engines sounded like a miniature battle.

"If any one challenges you to a little sprint, accept it," said Jerry to Ned and Bob, "but don't attempt to win."

"Why not?" asked Ned, always ready to take sides.

"Tell you later," was all Jerry had time to say, for just then two young men rode up to our heroes.

"What do you fellows say to a little sprint for a few miles around the track," inquired one young man, who wore a blue sweater.

"Just a practice warm-up," put in the other, who was attired in a pair of pink racing trousers. "It's rather dull going around this way, you know."

"We don't mind a little race," said Jerry. "Just for fun, however."

"Of course. What sort of a start do you prefer, flying or from a standstill?"

"Flying will suit us," Ned put in.

"All right. Come on, we'll ride around once together, line up at the judge's stand, and make a four-mile circuit."

This was agreeable to the boys and they prepared for the start with their unknown rivals. They all

came up to the line opposite the judges' stand in good formation.

"Go!" shouted the youth in the blue sweater.

Each contestant turned more power into his motor and the machines whizzed around the track in good time. It was easy to see that the two strangers were trying to get a "line" on the speeds of the motors of the three chums.

Both of the youths who had been so anxious for the sprint watched with eager eyes every motion of Bob, Ned and Jerry. But the latter, under the direction of Jerry, did not operate their motors at top speed. This was what the strangers wanted. They desired to see just how fast the machines of the Cresville boys could go, so as to know what sort of competitors they would have when the big event came on.

All the efforts of the two schemers to get either of our three heroes to "make pace" for them failed. Bob, Ned and Jerry just went around easily, sometimes taking the lead, and again dropping behind. The impromptu race was finally ended with the motors running about three-quarters speed, and Jerry and Ned just a little in the lead.

"You two win!" cried the youth in the blue sweater. "Pretty good machines you have there."

"They'll do," agreed Jerry, determined that the strangers should not find out that they had been suspected. "And we went at a pretty good clip, while it lasted."

"No doubt," commented the lad in the blue sweater. Plainly the two plotters were disappointed. They had not succeeded in taking the speed-measure of the three chums.

The track was now well filled with those practicing for the coming race. More than a score were scooting around on their machines. Few motors were as fine and complete as those of the three chums and not many had the double cylinder improvement.

"Shall we go around again?" asked Ned.

"I think we'd better," counseled Jerry. "That sprint was nothing. What we most need is to ride in a big crowd and not lose our nerve when we think there is going to be a collision."

"I hope there will be no smash-ups," came from Bob. "If I thought that I wouldn't go in."

"There will not be any if you are careful," advised Jerry. "Just keep your wits about you and mind your steering. Poor steering is responsible for more accidents than anything else."

"What do you suppose those two chaps wanted to see how fast we could go for?" asked Bob.

"They wanted to know just what sort of opposition they might count on," replied Jerry.

"I don't think those fellows gained much," said Ned.

"Me either," commented Jerry. "Another thing we must look out for is a pocket.'"

"What's that?" asked Bob, who was not very well up on racing terms.

"You'll see in a minute," said Jerry.

He speeded up his motor. At the sound of the quicker explosions there were hasty glances at the youth on the part of many strangers. Jerry was off down the track in a trice. The next instant a dozen riders had taken after him, anxious to see what his machine could do. But Jerry was too wise to be caught.

He pretended to be trying to get more revolutions from his motor, but, in reality he was throttling down the gasolene and advancing the spark, which made the reports quicker but which did not increase his speed.

The bunch of a dozen riders soon surrounded Jerry. He continued to speed away, but in a few moments he found himself in the apex of a "V" shaped gathering of contestants. They were ahead and on either side of him; a veritable pocket, from which there was no way out so close were the

riders bunched. As soon as Jerry would try to pass any one the others would crowd in front and prevent it.

Finally Jerry shut off the power of his machine, and with a laugh at the efforts of those who thought they were fooling him, he came to a halt, and dismounted.

"Smart kid, that," commented one of the older riders. "Up to snuff!"

"Thinks he is," growled the youth in the blue sweater. "He and those other two with him fooled me a while ago. I couldn't get a rise out of him."

"Now you see what a pocket is," said Jerry as he joined his chums. "If you get into one do your best to ride out, or you'll lose the race, providing the others stick together and have made up their mind to let one of their number win."

The practice continued for some time. A little before noon there was a stir at the track entrance and a motor cycle, painted a bright red on every available space shot on the track. The loudness of the explosions told that it was a machine of high power, and it attracted considerable attention.

"There's a faster machine than ours," called Jerry.

"Yes, and do you see who's riding it?" asked Ned.

"No. Who?"

"Jack Pender."

"Is that Noddy's machine painted over?"

"No, it looks like a new one," said Ned. "Yes, it is a new one," he added as he got a closer view of the motor which swept by at that instant.

"If he goes in the race we'll have to look sharp if we want our touring car," Jerry remarked.

Jack Pender did not seem to care to have anything to say to the three chums, and neither did they seek to speak to the bully's toady. Bob, Ned and Jerry rode together around the track for several minutes, while Jack occasionally passed them, making swift speed.

"Guess I'll go off and get some dinner," Jerry announced finally. He was opposite the gate by which riders left the track and steered for it. He looked and saw Jack coming toward him, but noted that the latter would, in the natural course of events, pass behind him.

"Look out there! What's the matter with you?" cried Jack in sudden anger. Jerry glanced around in time to see the rider of the red machine steering directly for him, having left his course to do so. A collision was imminent, and only by a

skillful handling of his machine did Jerry so manage that Jack only struck the rear wheel with his front one.

"What are you trying to do?" cried Jerry.

"What are you up to?" retorted Jack. "You got right in my way!"

"And I say you deliberately left your path to try and run me down!" cried Jerry.

"It's false!" exclaimed Jack, getting off his motor.

"It is not, and I'll leave it to any one who saw it," spoke Jerry sharply. He was very angry.

"That's right; you had plenty of room to pass him," said a quiet dark man, who had been making several rounds of the track. "I don't know either of you, but the man on the red machine is to blame."

"Mind your own business!" snapped Jack.

"Look here, my young friend," said the dark man, as he got off his machine and came close to Jack. "I would advise you to be a little more careful of your language and your conduct. You were either foolishly or deliberately careless in this matter. This track is for gentlemen, remember."

What affair of yours is it?" asked Jack with a growl.

"I am one of the directors of the club, and I

will most certainly make it my affair, if necessary."

Jack had nothing more to say, and turned off the track with his loud-puffing machine.

"Did he damage your motor any?" asked the man of Jerry.

"I guess not," was the answer.

"If you want to make a complaint to the club I will be a witness for you," went on the director of the organization.

"No, I had rather drop it now," replied Jerry. "I thank you, just the same."

"He and Noddy make a nice team, don't they?" inquired Ned, he and Bob having followed Jerry from the track.

"Well, I suppose it comes natural for them to be mean," replied Jerry. "The only thing to do is to avoid trouble, but not to give in too much."

"I wonder if he is going in the race with that red machine? If so we'll have to hustle," commented Ned.

"That's what races are for," said Jerry, with a smile.

CHAPTER XXII.

JACK PENDER'S TRICK.

It was on Saturday, when they had once more gone to the track for practice, that the boys had another encounter with Noddy Nixon and Jack Pender. The three chums had been making several rounds, and, as it was rather warm, had left the oval and gone to lie down in the shade of some trees. Their machines they had left in the rear of the club house, not far away.

"Do you know what I think we ought to do?" asked Bob as he reclined at length in the grass, chewing a straw.

"What new plan have you on foot now, Chunky? A scheme to get some one to race for you, or an arrangement to get out of training?" asked Jerry.

"Neither one," was the reply, "but I think we ought to begin to think of what we will do with our touring automobile."

"Wait until one of us wins it," advised Ned.

"We don't stand any better chance than a dozen others."

From off in the distance there sounded the loud explosions of an approaching motor cycle.

"That's Noddy's machine," said Jerry. "I hope he doesn't come around here bothering us."

The noise sounded nearer and, in a few minutes Noddy rode up on his cycle. He got off, ran his machine close to where the three chums had stored theirs, and then came to where Bob, Ned and Jerry were taking their ease.

"You fellows going in the race?" asked Noddy, in rather more friendly tones than he was in the habit of using to those he did not care for.

"We expect to," answered Jerry.

"And you think you'll all win, I s'pose?" went on the bully, in a sneering tone.

"One of us hopes to take a prize," said Jerry, preserving a calm voice.

"You haven't any of you one chance in a hundred," said Noddy decidedly. "Some of the best motor cyclists in the country are going in the race."

"I guess we stand as good a chance as any one," put in Ned. "This isn't like bicycle riding. A great deal depends on the machine, and we have good ones."

"I tell you none of you can win."

"You wait and see," advised Jerry.

"Do you want to back your opinion with any money?" asked Noddy. "If you do, say the word and I'll bet you any amount." He pulled out quite a roll of bills.

"We don't bet," returned Jerry quietly.

"Oh! I suppose you're afraid you'll lose," came with a sneer.

"No, it isn't that," went on Jerry, looking the bully square in the eye. "We don't bet on principle, but we do think we'll win, and, if we did bet it would not be with you, Noddy Nixon."

"Do you mean to say I'm not good enough to bet with?" demanded Noddy, advancing toward Jerry.

"I didn't say that, but you can take my remark any way you choose," replied Jerry.

"And I'll take it that you want to insult me!" exclaimed the bully.

"Very well."

"And I allow no one to insult me without paying for it," proceeded Noddy, in a blustering tone. "You'll have to fight me."

"Look here!" exclaimed Jerry. "You seem to want to pick a quarrel, Noddy Nixon. Let me tell you I'm not afraid of you. I don't want to fight, but, if I have to you'll be the first to cry

'quits.' I'm not anxious to fight, but I'm not going to run away."

"Nor I!" cried Ned and Bob.

"You can fight us all, one after the other," suggested Ned.

"You mind your own business; I wasn't talking to you," called Noddy, now thoroughly angry.

"The business of one of us is the business of all of us," replied Jerry with a laugh. "Better be careful Noddy."

The bully growled out something in reply, and cast a glance over his shoulder. He gave a start as he did so, and then, turning quickly made off on his machine. Jerry looked in the direction Noddy had peered.

"We'd better be getting over to our machines," said Jerry suddenly. "I thought I saw some one moving about near them."

"Only boys watching to see how they work," said Bob, who felt too comfortable to move.

"I'm going over to see who they are, though. Looks like a pretty big boy, and I don't want my machine put out of gear when the race is only four days off."

"That's so, those youngsters might get something out of kilter," agreed Ned, springing up.

He and Jerry went over to where the motors

had been left. The cycles were surrounded by a crowd of small boys, but, as Jerry had remarked, one of the lads seemed to be well grown. Suddenly the group of youngsters parted and a tall youth came from their midst. He glanced in the direction of Jerry and Ned, and then, with a quick motion, broke into a run. He hurried around the corner of the club house and, the next instant there came the sound of a motor cycle in motion. A second later a red machine was observed moving off in the distance.

"That was Jack Pender!" cried Jerry.

"That's who it was!" agreed Ned. "And he was up to some trick, I'll bet."

"If he's damaged my machine he'll pay for it," vowed Jerry.

The two boys, who were joined by Bob in a little while, reached their machines. The crowd of small lads who had not gone watched the three chums as they made a careful examination of their wheels.

"That fellow said he was fixing them," volunteered a little boy in short trousers.

"What fellow?" asked Ned.

"The one that just went away from here. He had a wrench and screw driver and he was doing something to the engine."

"Who was he?" asked Jerry, wanting to make sure.

"I know! It was Jack Pender!" exclaimed another of the small boys.

Jerry was the first to finish the examination of his motor.

"Well, he's fixed mine all right!" he exclaimed, straightening up. "He's taken off part of the carburetor and the motor is no good until I get a new one."

"He's done the same thing to mine!" cried Ned, just discovering the damage which had been done.

"And to mine," added Bob.

"Boys, this is very serious," said Jerry when he had drawn his two chums out of hearing of the group of small boys. "The machines can't run without those parts."

"But can't we easily get them?" asked Bob.

"We could in New York, or Boston or some large city," said Jerry. "But have we time to send? To-day is Saturday, the race takes place Thursday. We can't get word to any supply store until Monday morning, and it's a question whether we would receive the parts in time."

"We can telegraph," said Bob.

"Even that takes time. Jack Pender laid his

plans well for this trick. He means to keep us out of the race!" Jerry said.

"Can't we get the parts in Cresville?" asked Bob.

"Not a store keeps them that I know of," replied Jerry. "I'm afraid we're done for. Most likely Pender broke the parts and threw them away."

"No, we're not done for!" exclaimed Ned.

"Why not?"

"Because I'll ride into Boston to-night and get the new parts!"

"But none of our machines can be run," objected Bob.

"I'll borrow Mr. Wakefield's," said Ned. "He'll lend it to me when I tell him how the case stands!"

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Bob. "You're the stuff Ned!"

"I doubt if you can do it," objected Jerry. "There is no moon to-night, and the roads are hard to find."

"I'm going to try," insisted Ned. "Jack Pender shall not keep us out of the race if I can prevent it!"

"Well, hurry and find Mr. Wakefield," urged Jerry. "There's no time to lose. Bob and I

will see to your machine and you can start at once."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RIDE TO BOSTON.

NED found Mr. Wakefield, the athletic instructor, in the gymnasium of the club house. The boy hastily told him of the trouble, not however mentioning Jack's name.

"And, Mr. Wakefield," said Ned, in great distress, "If we can't get those carburetor parts we can't race."

"I'll do all I can to help you," said Mr. Wakefield. "Take my machine and welcome."

Ned really had quite a task before him. It was a long ride to Boston, and there would be no moon. Besides the roads were not of the best. It was after four o'clock when he secured Mr. Wakefield's machine, and a half hour was lost in oiling it up, and seeing that it was in shape for the lengthy trip.

"I do not know whether to let you go or not," said Mr. Slade, when Ned broached the subject to him.

"I really must go, father," and Ned spoke so

earnestly that Mr. Slade was more than half persuaded.

"Well, I suppose it is hard to have to think of giving up the race," he said at length. "And it seems to be the only way to do. So you may go, but be very careful."

"I will," promised Ned.

He prepared himself for the trip, and was about to start from his house, where he had taken Mr. Wakefield's machine, when Bob and Jerry came along. They had wheeled their motors to their houses, and brought Ned's with them.

"Are you off?" asked Jerry.

"Just ready to start," was the reply.

"You ought to be able to get the parts in any automobile store," said Jerry. "The only bad feature of the trip will be coming home. I wish I was going along."

"Well, I haven't any time to lose," said Ned, "so here goes!"

He leaped into the saddle, started the machine off by means of the pedals and soon was puffing down the road.

The start was made about half past five o'clock, on a pleasant afternoon. The sun shone through a hazy mist, and, though it had been warm, it was cooler now. Because it was of an

earlier pattern, Mr. Wakefield's machine was not as speedy as any of the boys', and Ned realized he would have to be longer on the journey than if he had his own fast motor.

"But I'm in luck to be able to get any machine at all," he said to himself.

For the first ten miles Ned had no trouble, as he was familiar with the road. He had been riding over an hour when he came to a small village which, he learned by inquiry, was thirty miles from the big city.

He rode out of the little town, and then, coming to a place where several roads branched off was puzzled which one to take, as there was no sign posts. No house was near and no one seemed to be traveling.

"I'll take the middle road," thought Ned. "It's trusting to chance, but it's all I can do."

He had ridden perhaps four miles when he met a farmer driving a bony horse attached to a dilapidated wagon. Poor, thin and old as the horse was it seemed frightened at the sight of the machine, and inclined to rear on its hind legs and bolt.

"Is this the road to Boston?" asked Ned, knowing he had little time to waste in talk, however pleasant it might be.

"Wa'al ye kin git to it this way, but it'll take ye a long time. Ye're going in a opposite direction. Ye'd oughter taken the left hand road back there at the forks."

"Thanks," said Ned, briefly, turning his machine in readiness to go back and take the right road.

"Hold on! Maybe I can make some kind of a trade with ye for that threshing machine ye got!" called the old man, but Ned, with a friendly wave of his hand, started back to regain the right road.

He resolved to be more careful next time in taking roads where there was more than one. So, when he again reached places where the highways diverged he waited until some one came along, or he went back to the last house he had passed, and inquired.

He rode on for two hours longer. It was getting a little dusky now because of the clouds, and Ned began to fear he was in for a storm. He wished he was at his destination, for, if worst came to worst, he could stay in Boston all night, and start back in the morning. But he soon saw evidences that he was nearing some large city. Houses became more frequent, and every now and then he would pass through some settlement or

good sized suburb. Then, off in the distance, he descried the Hub City.

"There's Boston!" he cried. "Now for an automobile or motor store."

Getting on to good roads he speeded his machine up as fast as it would go, which was not overly rapid, and was soon riding through the streets of the historic city.

He kept his eyes open, and presently saw an automobile shop. The man was just closing up.

"Wait a minute!" called Ned. "Hold on! I want to get something!"

"You'll have to be quick," said the man.

Ned lost no time in telling what he desired.

"Here's what you want," said the dealer. "We got some new ones in to-day."

"Thanks," said Ned fervently, as he paid for the articles. He stowed the precious parts safely away in his pockets. Then he began to think of supper. It was nearly ten o'clock, but he found a small restaurant open, and made a hasty meal. Then, lighting his own acetylene gas lamp, which he had brought along in place of the oil affair Mr. Wakefield carried, the boy prepared for his homeward trip.

This was a very different thing from riding along in the afternoon and early evening. If he

was in doubt of a road he could find plenty of persons to ask. But after dark every one seemed to go to bed, as he noticed when he passed from the immediate Boston suburbs into the country. Several times Ned had to get off his machine and, with his lamp for a torch, hunt around for a sign post to tell him which road to take.

Once he came to where three roads divided. He could find no friendly pointing finger to tell him which one to take, and there was not a house in sight. The last residence he had passed was half a mile back. He did not relish going on the wrong highway until he met some one to set him right, nor did he want to retrace his journey.

"If only some one would come along now," he murmured.

By dint of making inquiries at many farm houses Ned managed to cover about twenty miles of his homeward trip. Then, as it grew later, the friendly lights that shone from the lonely roadside residences went out, and Ned began to think his trip was going to be a rather unpleasant one at the close, although it was still fairly clear. He did not like to awaken people up to ask them about the road, and it was evident that nearly every one in the country had gone to rest.

It was very dark. His gas lamp gave a bril-

liant thread of light directly in front of him, but that was all. It was quiet, also, save for the chug-chug of his motor. Now and then an owl would hoot, and the sound, strange and weird, seemed to chill Ned's blood, though he knew what it was.

Once again the old trouble of coming to two roads, and not knowing which to follow, confronted him. It was close to midnight, and the country was so deserted that for the last two miles he had not passed a house. Nor did he know how far in advance he might have to go before reaching one.

"Shall I go to the right or left?" Ned asked himself. "I'll trust to luck, I'll toss a stone up, and take the road it falls nearest to."

He had dismounted from his wheel, and, standing at the fork of the roads, tossed a pebble into the air. It fell on the left path.

"The left it is!" He got on his machine, rode about a quarter of a mile, and then, with a loud noise his rear tire burst. It came with such suddenness and gave Ned such a shock that he nearly tumbled from the motor.

"Here's luck!" he exclaimed. He quickly discovered that the break was a bad enough one to mend in daylight to say nothing of attempting it in the darkness.

"I guess I'm booked to stay here all night," the boy said. "If I could find a farm house near by I'd ask to stay there."

But he did not feel like pushing the heavy motor along the road in a search.

"It's warm, and I can stay out all night," Ned thought. "I'd like to get in shelter though."

He paused in the middle of the dark road and looked about him. Off to the left were fields.

"Looks like a lot of hay in that meadow," he told himself. "If it is that will be just the thing to crawl into and go to sleep." He walked closer and peered at the dark objects that had attracted his attention. He climbed the fence, and discovered that his surmise was right.

Pulling and hauling the motor he got it through the bars. Then, selecting a big mound of the fragrant dried grass, Ned made a hole in it, crawled in, curled up and, in spite of his queer bed, was soon sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXIV.

GETTING BACK HOME.

THE sun was shining in through the chinks of the mound of hay the next morning when Ned awoke.

"What! Why! Where in the world am I?" he exclaimed. He had slept so hard, because of the fatigue of his ride, that he could not remember where he was.

"Oh I know now," he said, at length, as the recollection of his experience came to him.

He stretched, rolled out of his fragrant bed and, brushing the wisps of hay from his hair, stepped out into the glow of the sun. His first care was to feel in his pocket to see if the carburetor parts, that had cost him all his trouble, were safe. They were all right, and then Ned began to think of breakfast and getting home. He feared his parents would be worried over his absence.

"Doesn't seem to be a very thickly settled locality around here," observed Ned, taking a survey and seeing nothing but fields and woods in the dis-

tance. "I guess I'm in for a long walk for breakfast. And I've got to push that motor. I can't fix the tire with what tools I have along. Well, there's no help for it, and I suppose it will give me a good appetite."

He found Mr. Wakefield's motor where it had been left, covered with hay to keep off the dew. Ned rolled it out into the road and then, hearing the musical tinkle of a brook near by, he bethought that a wash and a drink of cool water would not come amiss.

He found a clear sparkling little meadow stream. It raced and bubbled its way over the white pebbles, and between banks of green grass and moss.

"That looks good," thought Ned, as he stretched out at full length on his face and took a long drink. Then he found a shallow little basin, scooped out of a stone where the water formed a pool, and there he washed and felt much refreshed.

"I'm still in the dark as to whether I'm on the right road or not," thought Ned. "But it's daylight now, and I might as well keep going this way until I meet some one to inquire of."

So he started off. He was hungry and wished very much for something to eat. It was no fun pushing the heavy motor cycle along the dusty

road, but Ned dared not leave it behind on the highway for fear something might happen to it.

He had gone about a mile, perhaps, when down the road he saw a farm wagon, to which was hitched a team of horses, approaching.

"Here comes some one at last," Ned thought, "and I may get a lift."

"Hello bub!" exclaimed the driver of the horses, a jolly-looking blue-eyed farmer, when the wagon came opposite Ned. "Had a smash up?"

"No, only a tire broken," replied the boy. "But can you tell me whether this is the way to Cresville?"

"Well, you could get there on this road, but it's about five miles out of your way. Is that where you want to go?"

"It's where I live," Ned answered. "I went to Boston yesterday, and on my way back last night I lost my way, my machine broke, and I had to sleep in a hay stack."

"I see you did," observed the farmer. "Some of the grass is in your hair yet."

Ned hastily removed the traces of his recent bed.

"But if you're going to Cresville," went on the man, "I can give you a lift. I'm going within three miles of there."

"I'd be much obliged if you would," spoke Ned.

"Well, pile your machine in back there, and climb up on the seat," was the invitation, and Ned did so.

"You don't happen to know of any restaurants around here, do you?" he asked the driver.

"No, nothing open on Sunday."

"Sure enough, it is Sunday!" cried Ned. "I'm so upset I'd about forgotten it."

"Sleeping in the hay instead of your bed sort of put you off the track," suggested the farmer.

"That's what it did," agreed Ned.

It was a beautiful morning and Ned thoroughly enjoyed it as he rode along. Even the rough jolting of the farm wagon was not unpleasant.

"I don't usually travel in this kind of a rig on Sundays," explained the farmer. "But I have to go over to Doddtown for some grain for the horses, and I had to take this cart."

"I'm glad you did," said Ned. "If you had been in a carriage I couldn't have brought the motor cycle with me."

"No more you could," spoke the farmer. "Everything happens for the best after all. But here you are. This is as far as I go on your way. If you take that road," pointing to where one

branched off from the highway the wagon was on, "you'll come to Cresville. Sorry I can't take you all the way, but it's only three miles."

"I'm much obliged to you for the lift," said Ned, getting the machine out of the wagon, and bidding his new acquaintance good-bye.

Leaving the motor cycle at a house on the outskirts of town, Ned reached home about noon, and found his parents much alarmed. Jerry and Bob were at his house, and there was talk of organizing a searching party.

"Did you bring the carburetor parts?" asked Jerry.

"I did!" exclaimed Ned, as he passed them over.

"They're all right," announced Jerry, after an inspection. "From now on we must take care not to leave our machines out of our sight. But what did you do with Mr. Wakefield's motor?"

Ned told where it was. Then he had a bath and got ready for dinner. After the meal, which his chums ate with him, Ned went and told Mr. Wakefield what had happened to the motor. The latter was not alarmed for the safety of his machine, and it was arranged that one of the employees of the club could drive over for it on Monday. The rest of the day the boys spent

quietly, anxiously waiting for the morrow when they might again try their motors.

Bright and early on Monday each boy was fitting the new carburetor parts to his cycle. The apparatus fitted perfectly and soon all three were spinning down the road at a good speed. They rode for several miles and were about to turn back, on Jerry's proposal to go to the athletic track, when they heard the noise of an approaching motor.

The next instant a machine turned the corner of the road, and came toward them. All three of the chums started as they saw that the rider was Jack Pender. Hardly knowing what they were doing, Ned, Bob and Jerry spread themselves out across the highway so that Pender could not pass. On his part he was so surprised that he shut off the power of his machine and came to a stop, just as the three chums, who had done likewise, dismounted.

"Well?" observed Jerry quietly. "I've been wanting to meet you, Jack."

"Don't you dare to touch me!" exclaimed Jack. "If you do I'll have you arrested."

"You're a nice one to talk about having people arrested," went on Jerry. "I've a good mind to shake you!"

"What did I do?" asked Jack, looking very uncomfortable.

"You know well enough what you did. Tried to fix our machines so they wouldn't work by taking off the carburetors. That's what you did."

"I didn't mean to," said Jack. "I was just — just turning them and they came off."

"You'd ought to be made to pay for the damage you did," put in Ned. "I had to go all the way to Boston for new parts."

"I haven't any money," whined Jack.

"You have enough to lend to Noddy Nixon," put in Bob, remembering that day when they had met Noddy at the soda-water booth, and the bully had boasted that Jack loaned him money.

"I never lent Noddy any money!" exclaimed Jack.

"He said you did!" exclaimed Jerry.

"Well, he tells — what business is it of yours any how?" Jack interrupted a statement he was going to make. "I don't have to tell you anything about my affairs."

"No one asked you to," Ned put in. "All we want is for you to let us and our machines alone."

"I think a good thrashing is what he needs," said Jerry, with mock severity, standing his ma-

chine against Ned's and advancing toward Jack.

"Oh no! Please don't!" begged the young coward. "I'll never do anything again. Please don't lick me! Noddy Nixon made me do it! Don't touch me, and I'll tell you everything!"

"Everything about what?" asked Jerry.

"About — about the — the mill robbery!" exclaimed Jack.

"What do you know of it?" asked Ned in amazement.

"I don't know very much, but you watch Noddy Nixon about six o'clock to-night," replied Jack. "There," he burst out, "I promised I wouldn't tell, but he's always getting me in trouble and never helping me out."

Then, before the boys could stop him, Jack Pender turned his machine in the opposite direction, leaped into the saddle and was soon moving off swiftly down the road.

"Shall we chase him?" asked Ned.

"No, let him go," replied Jerry. "We gave him a good scare, and, besides, we want to be on hand for something else."

"What?"

"We want to watch Noddy to-night."

CHAPTER XXV.

NODDY'S QUEER ACTIONS.

For a few moments after Jerry had spoken neither Ned nor Bob knew what to say. Events had happened so rapidly, and they seemed on the verge of such a discovery, that they were startled. Jerry alone kept cool.

"What do you think Noddy will do?" asked Ned.

"I might make a dozen guesses and not hit it," Jerry replied. "We can only wait and watch."

"Shall we do it together?" inquired Bob.

"Hardly that," spoke Jerry. "If he saw three of us on his trail he would probably suspect something. I have a plan."

"What is it?" asked Ned.

"You know there are only three ways Noddy can take after he leaves his house," said Jerry. "He can go up town, down town or he can take the road that leads out to the old wind mill."

"That's so," came from Bob.

"Now my idea is that we all three ought to

keep watch," went on Jerry. "If he goes up town Ned can follow him. If he goes down town Bob can take up the trail and if he goes out to the old mill I will go after him."

"All right," Jerry said. "That settles it. Now for home."

Little talk was indulged in. Each of the three chums felt that something of importance was to happen and their thoughts were too busy for conversation. In due time the boys separated, had their dinners and suppers, and shortly before six o'clock met by appointment in the post office, which was a block from Noddy's residence.

"Now remember," said Jerry. "If he goes up town you are to follow, Ned. Bob, it's your turn if he goes down, and if he takes the road to the old mill I'll follow."

They had long waits, for it was nearly nine o'clock before Noddy crept quietly from the rear door in the darkness of the night. He did not know that three pairs of sharp eyes watched his every movement. Peering on every side of him the bully quickly made his way to the street. Then, after a moment's hesitation he started rapidly off in the direction of the old mill.

"Here goes!" said Jerry, who was on the lookout.

Like a shadow he glided from his hiding place and was after Noddy. He kept a sufficient distance in the rear so that he would not betray himself by the sound of his footsteps. It was quite dark, for there was no moon, but the stars were bright.

"I wonder what he wants out here?" thought Jerry. "Is he going to meet some one?"

To his surprise he saw Noddy, having halted in front of the deserted mill, enter the dark and uninviting place without hesitation.

"Ugh! I wouldn't care to go in there alone," thought Jerry. "It looks spooky!"

He dared go no closer than the dilapidated fence that surrounded the structure. Crouching there in the shadow, he looked toward the mill, to discern what went on. No one seemed to be waiting for Noddy, nor did the bully show by his actions that he expected any one. Shortly after he had entered the place Noddy struck a light, as Jerry could see. It flickered and moved about some, but seemed to be kept in one room. Then, in a few minutes, the light went out, and Jerry heard footsteps approaching down the gravel walk that led to the main entrance of the mill.

"He either went there to get something or hide something," Jerry reasoned. "If it was to hide

something I may discover what it was. If it was to take something I have very little chance of success."

Still hiding in the shadow of the fence Jerry waited until Noddy had passed some distance down the road.

"I don't fancy going into that place very much," observed the boy, "but it's got to be done."

Considerably against his inclinations, Jerry took the dark path leading to the old mill. He started at every sound, and when an owl hooted in a near-by tree the boy jumped as if some one had yelled at him.

With beating heart he made his way into the deserted place. It was as dark as a pocket and the boy struck a light.

"If I only had a candle," he wished.

Hardly had he formed the thought when, glancing down, he saw a short wax end on the floor. He picked it up.

"This is the light Noddy had," reflected Jerry.

He lighted the wick, and the illumination somewhat dispelled the gloom. With eager eyes he scanned the place. Moving about he held the candle up where it would give a good light. But nothing rewarded his search. From side to side

he went. Then he held the light close to the floor. He had gone over almost every foot of surface and found nothing.

"I guess it's a wild-goose chase," thought Jerry. "But I'm sure Noddy did not go out of this room. I watched the light. Hello! What's that?"

He had suddenly struck his foot against a board that projected somewhat above the others in the floor.

"Queer I didn't notice that before," said Jerry. He lowered the candle carefully. "Looks as if it had been moved lately," he went on.

Thrusting his fingers beneath the edge of the board Jerry gave a strong pull. The plank did not budge. He tried again without success. At the third attempt, however, his strength availed, and he felt the piece of flooring suddenly yield. So quickly did it come from its place in fact that Jerry fell backward, knocking out his candle and leaving himself in utter darkness.

Quickly searching in his pocket the boy found his matches, struck a light and ignited the candle end. Then, with swiftly beating heart he peered down into the hole he had disclosed. He was rewarded by seeing a small wooden box, half covered with dirt and rubbish. With trembling fingers Jerry drew it forth and held it close to the

light. It was a square wooden receptacle with a hinged cover.

"It's the box that was stolen from the mill with the thousand dollars in it!" exclaimed Jerry.

He raised the cover. If he had had any doubts about his find they were dispelled when he saw the contents of the box. It was half filled with papers, seemingly of no value, but bearing the name of Amos Judson. There were receipts, notes, bills and memoranda. But there was no trace of the money.

"I'll take this away," said the boy, "and have a talk with Ned and Bob about it. "I think —"

There came a sudden sound that startled the lad. It was as if some one had stepped on the platform outside of the mill. Jerry quickly blew out his candle. Then, as he heard an owl hoot, he knew it was the bird that had made the noise, and breathed easier.

Not stopping to relight the candle, but replacing, as best he could in the darkness the plank, so the hole would not be noticed on a casual inspection, Jerry hurried from the mill and made a quick trip to Ned's house. He felt that matters were now at a crisis.

CHAPTER XXVI.

NODDY NIXON CORNERED.

As late as it was Jerry found his two chums anxiously waiting for him.

"Well?" asked Ned.

"Here is something," replied Jerry, showing the box which he had concealed under his coat. He told how he had found it and the three chums examined the contents curiously.

"What had we better do?" asked Bob.

"I'll tell you what I think," spoke Ned. "We ought to tell father. He will know what to do."

Mr. Slade was plainly surprised at some of the disclosures made, for, though he knew most of the circumstances, he was not acquainted with all of them. The boys had forgotten many details in their previous recitals, and, of course, the finding of the box was the latest occurrence.

"I must say you boys have sifted this thing out pretty well," said Mr. Slade. "You have a great deal more information than have the police."

"What had we better do about it?" asked

Jerry. "You see we are at a sort of stand-still now."

Mr. Slade thought for a few minutes.

"Here is what I would do," he said at length. "I would contrive to have a talk with Noddy Nixon, all three of you. I understand he is a sort of bully, but if the three of you are together there is nothing to fear from him.

"Once you get him alone somewhere you can tell him just what you know, and show him how everything points to him as the person who robbed the mill. It may be that the information will overwhelm him, and he will own to everything. Again, he may be innocent of everything, and able to explain all of his acts satisfactorily. In that case you will be glad that you made no public complaint."

After a little thought the boys voted this was the best thing to do. They arranged to send Noddy a note asking him to meet one of them in a secluded place the next day, and all three chums promised to be on hand.

Early the next day the three boys met again. In accordance with the arrangement of the night before, Jerry had sent a note to Noddy, asking the bully to meet him near the old wind mill.

"Come, for the matter is of great interest to

you," the note had said, and Jerry had signed no name. Ten o'clock was the hour set, and quite a while before that time the three boys were at the dilapidated structure.

"I think you two had better stay inside," said Jerry to Bob and Ned. "But remain where you can see and hear everything. I'll be out here when Noddy comes."

It was a few minutes after ten when Jerry saw Noddy coming up the path that led to the main mill entrance. No sooner had the bully caught sight of Jerry than he started, and seemed about to turn back.

"Don't go!" called Jerry. "Did you get my note?"

"Did you write that?"

"I certainly did."

"What's it all about?" growled Noddy. "If you're fooling me you'll wish you hadn't."

"I guess you won't think it's much like fooling," replied Jerry. "In the first place, have you ever seen this before?"

He suddenly held out the wooden box he had found hidden in the mill. At the sight of it Noddy started.

"Where — where did you get it?" Noddy gasped.

"Right here, in this mill," was the answer. "I took it out of a hole in the floor last night, right after you had been here. It has some papers in it from the Judson mill."

Noddy started again. His face was pale, and he trembled. His hands twitched nervously.

"What — what else?" he whispered.

"You might as well tell everything," said Jerry. "Ned saw you coming from the mill on the night of the robbery with this box under your arm. You said it had fish bait in it. We know how thick you were with Bill Berry, and how he tried to have the blame cast on Ned. And we know something else."

"What?"

"That you paid a bet to Paul Banner shortly after the robbery."

"Supposing I did?"

"Just this, we have — or, rather I have — one of the bills you gave to Paul."

"Well, what of that?" asked Noddy, trying to maintain a brave air.

"Only this. It was a ten dollar bill, issued by a state instead of a national bank, and it had the initials H. R. C. on it in red ink. We have learned that this bill was paid to Mr. Judson on the afternoon before the robbery, that it was placed

in the box — this box — that was stolen from the safe."

"Supposing some one gave that bill to me before I gave it to Paul?" asked Noddy.

"If you can prove that it will be a good thing for you," Jerry went on. "We have no desire, Noddy, to fasten this on you, but Ned must be cleared and the robbery mystery ended. Tell me who gave you the queer bank bill?"

But Noddy kept silent.

"On the night of the mill fire," Jerry went on, "we found the hammer and chisel that were used to cut the safe open, and also the dark lantern. If anything more is needed, Bill Berry will —"

"If Bill Berry tells that he saw me in the mill — !" cried Noddy, and then he stopped.

"We may need Bill's testimony," Jerry said. "You see we have nearly everything, Noddy. What have you to say?"

Noddy said nothing for a few minutes. He seemed ill at ease. Then he burst out:

"I may as well confess! You cubs have spied on me to good advantage. I had to take that money! I needed it to pay my debts. I heard Tom Judson say it was in the safe that afternoon. I knew the old iron box was easy to crack. I had no trouble to get in, and I began work. When I

was almost through I looked up, and saw Bill Berry looking in at me. I offered to go shares with him if he would keep quiet, and he did. Then, after a while he said another man, a chum of his, had seen me also, and I had to give him money. He would have shot me if I hadn't. It was one night in a lonely house."

Jerry nodded. He well remembered that night.

"Then," went on Noddy, "Bill suggested throwing the blame on Ned, because he was around the mill that night. It didn't work, however. Now, I guess the game is up. What are you going to do?"

"We'll have to consider," Jerry replied.

"We? Who is we?" asked Noddy.

"Bob, Ned, and myself."

"Are they here?"

"They heard it all. We needed several witnesses," was the answer.

"Give me one day more," pleaded the bully. "I may be able to pay the money back then."

"I'll see what the others say," replied Jerry. "Come out, Ned and Bob."

The two boys came from their place of concealment. Noddy did not appear to notice them.

"You heard what he said," spoke Jerry, "what do you say?"

"One day more will do no harm," said Bob, who felt a little compassion for Noddy, unfriendly as the bully had always been.

"All right," said Jerry, and Ned nodded in assent to the stout boy's proposal. "We will say nothing for another twenty-four hours, Noddy. Meet us here at this time to-morrow and we will decide what is to be done."

"I will," replied Noddy as he hurried away.

"Well, I'm glad that's over," remarked Jerry. "I hated to do it, but I felt it ought to be done. Now to go and tell Mr. Slade that Noddy has confessed, and see what's to be done to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXVII.

NODDY NIXON'S MOVE.

WHEN Mr. Slade had been informed of the outcome of the interview with Noddy, he said the boys had acted with caution and wisely.

"We will see if Noddy intends to settle and pay back the money," said Ned's father. "If he does not it is only right that his father should be informed, also the sheriff and Mr. Judson."

There was nothing to do but to wait until the next day. The three chums spent some time in wondering what Noddy would do. Then Ned exclaimed:

"Say, we're forgetting all about the race. Here it is Tuesday. The day after to-morrow we'll have to make a try for that touring car, and we ought to be practicing."

"Yes, and our wheels need overhauling," suggested Jerry. "I'm going to put in new batteries. Don't want to run any risk of the motor missing explosions when we're on the track, you know."

This was voted a wise precaution, and the motor

boys separated, to go home after their cycles, agreeing to meet in the afternoon on the track for practice runs.

Through a good part of the afternoon they went around and around at moderate speed, testing their motors thoroughly and practicing the turns. Others were doing the same, and no especial attention was drawn to our three heroes.

Along about five o'clock, most of the other prospective contestants having gone off, Jerry suggested it would be a good time to give the three motors a friendly trial. Accordingly a flying start was made from the judges' stand, and each of the three boys soon had his cycle going at almost top speed.

At first there seemed to be little to choose from among them. They hung well together at the start, and then Ned began to forge ahead a little. He had acquired more momentum than the others, perhaps, or the difference that exists in two motors made exactly the same, gave his wheel one or two more revolutions a minute than Jerry's or Bob's.

"Are you on full speed?" asked Jerry at length.

"No," replied Ned and Bod.

"Turn on all the power you can," was the suggestion. "Let's see what we really can do on the track."

The muffled explosions at once became more

rapid. The wheels whizzed around the track faster and faster, and Jerry and Bob began to creep up on Ned, who was leading. Then they passed him, and he was half a length behind. Again Jerry forged in front of Bob, and it seemed that the prize motor was going to prove the fastest.

But a careful eye could see that Bob was beginning to regain his lost ground. The distance between his wheel and Jerry's lessened until, after two more rounds Jerry and the stout youth were riding exactly on a line. Ned was perhaps a length behind.

"I guess this will do," called Jerry. "Shut down!"

Slowly the motors ceased their rapid explosions, and after another turn of the track the three boys came to a halt and dismounted.

"We're pretty evenly matched," said Ned. "My machine didn't do as well as I expected though."

They separated, arranging to be on hand at the old mill at ten o'clock the following morning, to clear up the last of the mill robbery mystery.

"Jerry, I wish you would take this message over to Mrs. Northrup's for me," said Mrs. Hopkins to her son, after supper that evening. "I want her to come and do some sewing for me."

"All right, mother," responded the boy.

"Are you going on your machine?" asked his sister.

"No, sis. I don't want to run any chance of puncturing a tire after dark. It's too near the race for that. I'm going to walk."

Off Jerry started. Mrs. Northrup lived in a cottage about a mile from Mrs. Hopkins. She was a widow who went out dressmaking. To get to her house Jerry had to pass the handsome residence of Mr. Nixon.

He looked at it as he went by on his way to deliver the message. There seemed to be no one about, and Jerry wondered if Noddy was at home, and what he was doing. Mrs. Northrup was in, and, as she wanted to write a reply to the note Jerry had brought, he had to wait a few minutes. Then the widow asked him all about himself and his family, and inquired about the coming race, which she had heard Jerry was interested in.

So, though the boy had meant to stay but a short time, he was there the better part of an hour, and, when he had the answer to his mother's note and was on his way back, it was nine o'clock and quite dark.

As Jerry came in front of the Nixon residence he was surprised to see no lights in the house.

"That's queer," he said to himself. "The place is usually well lighted, for they always have company there. I guess Mr. and Mrs. Nixon must be away from home."

He was about to pass on when he noticed a faint glimmer of light near the automobile shed, Mr. Nixon having recently purchased a big touring car.

"Rather dangerous to go out there with a lantern," Jerry thought, "especially if they have oil and gasolene stored there. "I wonder if Noddy is there?"

There was a side street, rather narrow and seldom used, which extended along the Nixon property to the left. It passed close to the automobile shed, and a drive-way had been constructed to enable the machine to be taken out into the side roadway if desired.

Having nothing particular to hurry him, and being of a curious turn of mind, Jerry decided that he would walk down the narrow thoroughfare and look at the new automobile shed, which he had not seen at close range. Accordingly he turned from the main street and soon found himself opposite the shed. He stopped to look at it, and, as he did so, he heard voices in conversation. At the same time the flicker of a light through a crack in the shed door could be seen.

"I wonder if it's thieves trying to steal the machine," thought Jerry. "Guess I'll watch a little while."

He took a position behind a tree where he could see what went on without being observed. The voices in the shed grew louder.

"I tell you I will take it!" some one exclaimed.

"That's Noddy," said Jerry softly.

"I know what I'm doing," Noddy went on, seemingly in answer to an objection from some one whose words Jerry could not distinguish. "You can come along if you want to, or stay behind."

Jerry shrank closer behind the tree. There was a glare of light as the shed door was opened, and in the beams the boy could distinguish the form of Bill Berry. That he and Noddy were planning some new escapade was evident.

"Is it all right?" asked Noddy, sticking his head out of the door.

"Yes."

"Come on then," went on the bully. "Put out the light. We've got to escape in the darkness. It's a good thing the folks are away to-night. Well, here is where we leave Cresville behind, and those three cubs that got me into this trouble!"

Jerry heard the sound of the motor car being cranked up. Then, as he waited in the darkness,

he saw the big touring machine glide out of the shed under Noddy's guidance.

"Jump in, Bill!" called the youth, and Berry did as requested.

Noddy threw in the gear clutch, and the machine rolled slowly down the inclined drive-way to the street, right opposite Jerry, who still crouched behind the tree.

"He's running away in his father's automobile!" Jerry exclaimed softly. "I wonder if I ought to give an alarm?"

The motor car was now turning out into the main thoroughfare. It bore no lights and made scarcely any noise.

"No," thought Jerry. "Let him go. It may be better that way."

And so Noddy, afraid to face the consequences of his confessed crime, fled from his home. Pondering over what would be the outcome on the morrow, Jerry went home and to bed, resolving to get up early and tell his chums what he had seen.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE GREAT RACE.

"Have you heard the news — great excitement — big robbery — Mr. Nixon's automobile stolen — Noddy kidnapped — terrible — awful — whoop!"

Andy Rush let out the above avalanche of words as he met Ned the next morning, as the merchant's son was on his way to see Jerry.

"What's all that, Andy?"

"Last night! Somebody kidnapped the auto and rode off in Noddy — fearful — terrible — I mean some one kidnapped Noddy and rode off in the auto! I'm all excited!"

"I can see that without being told," remarked Ned. "But can't you calm down a bit and explain."

Andy tried but it was hard work. Ned gathered that something out of the ordinary had happened. As soon as he could leave Andy he hurried to Jerry's house.

"Have you heard the news?" asked Ned.

"About Noddy and the auto?"

"Yes."

"I was there when it happened."

"You don't mean it! Tell me all about it!"

Thereupon Jerry did. He had no sooner finished than Bob appeared and wanted the particulars.

"Have you told any one about this?" asked Ned.

"Only you two."

"Then we'd better go and tell father. He expects us to meet Noddy again at ten o'clock today."

The three chums called on Mr. Slade. He was greatly surprised at what Jerry had to tell, and he agreed that no especial good would have come from Jerry having given an alarm at the time.

"I must see Mr. Nixon and explain the situation to him," said Mr. Slade. "The sheriff had better be told also. You boys might as well come along, to give certain details."

In a little while the three boys, with Mr. Slade, were in the drawing room of the Nixon home. Mr. Nixon, looking worn and pale, greeted them. Mr. Slade went over the whole story, occasionally calling on one or the other of the boys as to certain facts. He told the circumstances from the

time Ned saw the light in the mill until the happenings of the previous night, when Jerry saw Noddy run away in the automobile.

"I am deeply grieved at my son's conduct," said Mr. Nixon. "It is a bitter blow to me. I thank you Mr. Slade, and you boys also, for being so considerate as not to publish the story broadcast. I have shame enough without that.

"I shall pay back the thousand dollars Noddy took. I will ask you, Mr. Slade to be a witness to that transaction. As far as the automobile is concerned, that was my property, and, in order to save my son from being branded as a double thief, I here and now make him a present of the machine. So he is in something that belongs to him. I only hope he comes back, for I love him in spite of his faults.

"I agree with you, Mr. Slade, that the sheriff must be informed. It is only due Ned, to clear him of all suspicion, though any one who knew him would be sure he was never guilty. That is all that can be done, I believe. When I pay Mr. Judson the money he has lost he will have no reason for proceeding against my son. This ends the mill robbery mystery forever I hope. Once again I thank you all for your consideration."

Mr. Slade quietly motioned for the boys to with-

draw and Mr. Nixon was left alone in his grief and sorrow. That afternoon Mr. Slade accompanied Noddy's father to Mr. Judson and the stolen money was repaid. The mill owner agreed to begin no legal proceedings against the misguided young man. Nor was there any charge against Bill Berry, though Mr. Nixon said he wished Noddy was out of the bad man's influence. When the sheriff was told of the circumstances and informed that the case had been settled he announced that he was satisfied.

"I always did like the looks of you, Ned," he remarked, "and I was sorry to arrest you, but duty is duty, you know, as the elephant said when he squirted water in the face of the man who stuck a pin in him."

The boys did not quite see the connection, but decided to let it go at that. The sheriff, who had called on Mr. Slade, at the latter's request, went off, and said the case was ended as far as he was concerned.

"And now to get ready for the race to-morrow!" cried Jerry. "Everything is straightened out, and we only have to think of winning. Hurrah!"

Each one was up bright and early the next morning, though the races did not start until two o'clock

in the afternoon. It was a beautiful September day, just cool enough to take the temper from a warm sun, and with only a light breeze blowing.

Somehow the morning passed. The boys made one trip to the grounds without their machines, and found men busy raising the banks at the turns of the course, so that there would be less danger to the riders. The turns were banked with wood, although the track itself was a hard dirt one.

Though it seemed hours and hours until the hands of the clock approached the "two" mark, they did eventually. Shortly before one o'clock, however, the boys were at the track. Old Pete Bumps was there ahead of them, having been sent over by Mr. Baker.

"Here we all be, happy and free," said Pete, as he greeted the boys.

"Here, just stay near the machines," said Bob. "And mind, don't go away from them, no matter if some one offers you a pipe, cigars, tobacco and matches."

"That I will not, I will stay on the spot," said Pete, gravely.

"My, what a crowd!" exclaimed Ned.

And indeed there was a big gathering. The grand stand was almost filled, and the bleachers completely, while hundreds stood up all the way

around the oval track. There were many ladies and gentlemen, club members and citizens of Cresville, besides any number of boys and girls.

The Cresville Athletic Club was a well known one, and the big prizes offered for the motor-cycle race had attracted riders from all over the state. There were thirty starters, and, as the track was not wide enough for them all to line up at once it had been decided to get them away in three batches of ten each, the second squad to start off after the first finished, and the third after the second.

The boys made quick work of getting into their racing togs. Then, with fifteen minutes to spare before the five minute warning gun would send all practicers from the course, they went out on the track. They found their machines were working to perfection, and each one, in his secret heart, hoped he would win the coveted first prize.

It seemed no more than a few minutes before a gun went off, and a man with a megaphone began shouting to have the track cleared. People scurried for their seats, and there was a tense feeling in the air, that always preceeds a test of strength and endurance. Riders hurried from the course to give a last drop of oil to their machines. Late coming contestants were busy pinning their num-

bers on their shirts, and, altogether there was a scene of confusion.

Though it was the largest race the three chums had ever been in, they kept cool. They had all their arrangements made, and soon, with all the other riders they were called to the judges' stand. They were briefly told of the rules, and then lots were drawn to determine in what squad the riders were to start off.

Ned, Bob and Jerry each drew different numbers. Ned was to start off with the first batch, Jerry with the second, and Bob with the third.

In this way it would not be known until the very last squad had finished who had won, and thus interest would be maintained until the end.

"Bang!" another shot was fired. It indicated that the races would start in two minutes.

"Go in and win, Ned," advised Jerry as he and Bob left their chum with the riders of the first batch.

"The same to you!" exclaimed Ned.

"Line up!" called the starter, and the ten riders mounted their machines, which were held for them by men engaged for the purpose by the club. There was a moment of suspense!

"Go!" shouted the starter, at the same time firing his revolver.

The riders, shoved off by those who held the machines, pedaled furiously, and then, having sufficient momentum, started the motors. It sounded as if a battery of gatling guns had gone into action, for most of the contestants, in an endeavor to lighten their cycles, had taken off the mufflers, and the wild cheer that was given by the spectators as the batch started off was drowned to the contestants by reason of the gas explosions.

Ned handled his machine well, and secured a good place, about third from the front. He quickly had his motor going at full speed, and he was delighted to see that he was increasing his lead over the man behind him. He was slowly creeping up on the man ahead of him, when the latter looked back. Then he turned on a little more power, and slowly drew away from Ned. The boy knew, then, that there was at least one machine faster than his.

Around and around the track the riders went. They took the turns at dangerous speed, and one man had a spill that put him out of the contest. Another burst a tire and had to withdraw. Ned managed to pass one of the men in front of him, but by that time some one had come up from the rear, and he still found himself third.

Suddenly, as he passed the judges' stand, he

heard a revolver shot, and saw a red flag waved. It indicated that there were two laps more.

On the eight riders swept like the wind, and, a quarter of a mile from the finish, one of the riders in front of Ned began to slacken speed. His batteries had failed at the last moment, and Ned rushed past him, a good second in the first squad.

"Fine!" exclaimed Jerry as he and Bob rushed up to congratulate him. "I only hope I do as well!"

"I want to see you do better," said Ned.

Little time was lost in getting the second detachment off. Again the explosions sounded and the air was rent with cheers. Jerry had secured a good start, but he had not made more than two laps before he was aware that a plan to get him into a pocket was being made. He tried to avoid it but he was pitted against racers of skill, most of them grown men.

Once inside the fatal "V" shaped formation of riders Jerry gave the race up for lost. His machine was going almost at top speed. He managed to get directly behind the fourth man in the left leg of the "V," and hung there, hoping some chance might offer. He knew he could make a good record if he was allowed to escape.

Then, when there was but a mile of the race left,

there came a chance. The man behind whom he was riding burst a tire. He fell from his machine and there would have been a serious smash-up had not Jerry quickly and skillfully turned aside, shot through the gap made by the missing fourth rider, and, swinging away from the pole a bit, taken his place second from the leader. Jerry threw his motor on to full speed. The man in the lead had his there already.

Jerry was hopeful. There was one lap more and his machine was working like a charm. He was but ten feet behind the leader, whose cycle was working to the limit, and Jerry saw that he was slowly but surely forging ahead.

Then one of those things happened that come so unexpectedly and so inexplainably to gasolene motors. Jerry's suddenly refused to work. The explosions ceased. He worked the pedals frantically, but it was of no use. The batch of riders swept past him, and he saw with regret and chagrin that he was distanced.

"There goes my chance!" he said sorrowfully as he dismounted and pushed his machine from the track. "All our hope is in Bob now!"

No sooner was the second squad of riders out of the way than the third batch came hurrying on the track. They were lined up, the pistol

cracked, and away they went. Ned and Jerry, who had found a good place to watch, strained their eyes for a sight of Bob.

"He's close to the front!" cried Ned.

"No, he's away to the rear," said Jerry, and so it proved.

By some mischance Bob was third from the rear as the riders swept around on the first lap.

"He doesn't look discouraged," said Jerry. "Maybe he is running his motor slow, and trying to keep out of a pocket."

"I hope so," grunted Ned.

With the exception of two riders well to the fore, and Bob and two others in the rear, the contestants were pretty well bunched. For several laps no one gained an advantage. One man tried to steal up, but he was promptly pocketed and lost whatever chance he had.

"Why doesn't Bob do something? There are only two miles more!" groaned Ned.

"Watch him!" cried Jerry suddenly. "I believe he's been hanging back on purpose, so as not to get in a pocket."

Ned gazed with straining eyes. Certainly Bob seemed to be increasing his speed. He was sixth from the last. Another lap was reeled off. Bob crept up two more places.

"Bang!" went the gun. The red flag was waved. There were two more laps and the race would be over.

"He's got to do something quick now!" exclaimed Jerry.

"And I'll bet he's going to do it!" exclaimed Ned as Bob swept past, a look of determination on his face.

Then, while the big crowd looked on, almost holding its breath, something happened. Bob turned the levers of his machine with a quick motion. He shot forward on his machine as an arrow leaves a bow. Outside and around the bunch of riders he swept! Past the two confident leaders he went! Up ahead to the very front he forged while a mighty shout went up!

"If he can only keep it!" cried Ned, and his voice had something of agony in it.

And keep it Bob did. He held his place the rest of that lap and during the next, though he was close pressed, and swept across the line a winner!

"He wins this heat! I wonder if he wins the race!" cried Jerry.

Their doubts were set at rest a minute later. The announcer, with his big megaphone invited silence with uplifted hand.

"Race won by Robert Baker!" he shouted. "Second was Timothy Wilson, and third William Jones. Time of the winner —"

But the crowd never stopped to hear what the official time was. With wild shouts, with the tossing of hats and canes in the air, they cheered again and again for Bob.

"He's won the race! He's won the race!" cried Ned jumping about and slapping Jerry on the back. "Now for our touring car!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TRIP OVERLAND PROPOSED.

NED and Jerry had a hard time making their way through the throng to where Bob stood. The crowd evinced a desire to catch up the victor and carry him on their shoulders. That a boy of his age should have won a race where many veteran riders contested was no small honor, and the people of Cresville were proud of Bob. Even the girls went wild with delight.

"It was just grand!" cried Alice Vines.

"Oh, I felt like jumping up and down when you won," came from Mollie Horton.

"I never saw anything more exciting," put in Helen Gale.

And all three of the young ladies looked as if they wanted to hug the winner of the contest.

But Bob had no desire to be made a hero of, and dodged those who would have done him public honor. He slipped to one side, and managed to join his two chums.

"Fine!" cried Jerry. "However did you do it?"

"I just took it easy until they thought I had no speed in my machine," answered Bob, smiling. "Then, when I saw a chance, I let it out. I'm sorry you and Ned didn't win though."

There were other races to come, bicycle events, a running contest and a test against time by an automobile, but the boys wanted to get off by themselves and talk matters over, so they went to the dressing rooms, donned their street clothes, and, Jerry's machine having been fixed, all three motors were left in charge of Pete Bumps.

The boys found a quiet corner of the grand stand and sat down to talk.

"Do you still think you'll ask for an automobile?" inquired Ned.

"Sure. That is if father will let me have one, and I don't see why he will not."

"If you get it we'll have some jolly fun," spoke Jerry. "Think of what we could do with it! Why, we could even make a trip overland!"

"That's what we'll do if our folks will let us," agreed Bob. "Think of going across the United States in a touring car!"

The athletic contests were soon over. Mr. Wakefield spied Bob in the grand stand.

"You'll have to come out of that," he cried with a laugh. "We want you."

"What for?" asked the boy.

"The winners are to be formally announced in the club house, and their certificates are to be awarded. Come along!"

Rather against his will, for he did not like to be shown off before a crowd, Bob went. His two chums followed. The main room of the club house was filled with people who had witnessed the races. At the sight of Bob they set up a cheer, and the boy would have escaped had not Mr. Wakefield gently detained him.

Then came the announcements of the prizes, and the statement that Bob had come in first, and won the grand trophy, which was to be anything he might select at a cost of two thousand dollars.

"And here is a certificate to that effect," said Mr. Wakefield, handing him an engraved card. "When you make up your mind what you want, let me know and you shall have it."

"I know about what I want," said Bob, "but I'll have to ask my father first."

Bob's father had not had time to go to the races, it being impossible for him to leave the bank, and Bob made up his mind to ride down to the institution and tell the banker the result of the contest.

He promised to meet his chums a little later, and let them know how Mr. Baker regarded the automobile project.

"Well, are the races over?" inquired the banker when his son came into the private office.

"Yes, sir."

"How did you make out? Come in tenth or last?"

"I won."

"You don't mean to tell me you got first prize! Not the two thousand dollars?"

"That's what I did, dad," replied Bob, laughing.

"Shake hands!" exclaimed the banker. "I'm proud of you, Bob, my boy! What are you going to take as your prize?"

"I — that is we — er — you see," burst out Bob, "Ned, Jerry and I agreed if either of us won, to ask for a touring automobile."

"Good land, boy! what do you want of that?"

"We thought we'd take a trip across the country."

"Well, well! This does beat all!" exclaimed Mr. Baker. An automobile! Goodness gracious sakes alive! What a boy you are!" and Mr. Baker sighed and laughed by turns.

"Well, what did he say?" asked Ned and

Jerry, when the stout youth joined them a little later.

"I think he'll let me have it," replied Bob, with all a boy's positiveness.

"Then hurrah for the trip overland!" cried Ned. "Make way for the Motor Boys in their mad rush across the continent!" How the boys got their coveted auto, and how they went on a long trip, wherein they had many adventures, will be told in the next volume, to be called "The Motor Boys Overland, Or, A Long Trip for Fun and Fortune."

In it Bob, Ned and Jerry will continue their adventures and, also, will be told how they took part in a mad race across the mountains to the gold mines, and how they met their old acquaintance, Noddy Nixon.

The boys got a taste of the pleasures of riding in an automobile that afternoon. After Bob's announcement of what he thought his father's decision would be they strolled about the town. As they were turning a corner they saw a big touring car approaching.

"Why, it's Mr. Wakefield!" exclaimed Jerry. "I didn't know he had a machine."

"I wish he'd ask us to take a ride," spoke Ned.

The car came nearer, vibrating with the power

of its motor. Then it slowed down, ran close to the curb and stopped.

"Hello, boys!" exclaimed Mr. Wakefield. "Want to go for a spin?"

"Do we!" exclaimed Ned. "We were just wishing you would ask us. But I didn't know you had an automobile."

"I only got it to-day," explained the athletic instructor. "I purchased one some time ago, and have been taking lessons in how to run one in Boston. They sent my car out to-day but I didn't get a chance to try it until now because of the club races. Come on! Jump in!"

The three boys lost no time in complying. Bob got in the front seat with Mr. Wakefield, for he thought if he was to have an auto he had better learn as much about how to run one as he could. Jerry and Ned were in the back. Off they started and made good speed.

"We'll go out in the country a way," said Mr. Wakefield. "I know a nice pleasant road."

Soon the car swung into a broad highway shaded by big trees through which the sun, that was beginning to sink into the west, shone faintly. On and on they went for several miles. Then as the evening shadows were beginning to fall, Mr. Wakefield turned his car toward Cresville, which

was reached all too soon for the boys, who had enjoyed their ride greatly.

"Thanks!" they chorused as they alighted. "It was great!"

"Glad you liked it," returned Mr. Wakefield. "I will take you again, some time."

"If we only had a car like that!" sighed Jerry, and Bob and Ned echoed his wish.

CHAPTER XXX.

AN IMPORTANT LETTER.— CONCLUSION.

It was a week after the race before Mr. Baker fully made up his mind to let his son have the automobile. Before announcing his decision he had a talk with Mr. Slade and with Mrs. Hopkins.

"It isn't so much letting Bob and his chums have the auto," said Mr. Baker, with a smile, "as it is what they will do after they get it."

"That's so," admitted Mr. Slade. "Still they are pretty careful boys, and their experience with the motor cycles has been good training for automobiling for them."

When Bob was informed of the decision he could scarcely keep from jumping up in the air and giving an Indian war-whoop. He raced off to tell his chums.

"It's all right! We get it! Dad just told me! The automobile — touring car — we'll take a lot of trips — start next week — whoop!" Bob shouted.

"You're as bad as Andy Rush!" exclaimed Ned.

"I feel like him!" cried Bob.

Little time was lost in notifying Mr. Wakefield of the boys' decision.

"I'm glad you took that," he said. "I know where I can get a fine, strong, serviceable touring car for the amount of the prize."

"And will you order it at once?" asked Bob eagerly.

"By the next mail," promised the instructor, with a laugh.

The three chums strolled down the main street of Cresville, their happiness showing on their faces. They passed the post-office, and Jerry happened to think of a letter his mother had given him to mail. He stepped inside and, after dropping the envelope in the slot, looked in the family box to see if there was any mail. There was one missive, and, when the clerk had handed it out, Jerry saw that it was addressed to himself. It was postmarked New York.

"I wonder who can be writing to me from there," he said.

He tore open the envelope and took out a small folded paper. It bore no date and began abruptly.

"To JERRY, NED AND BOB: You cubs are responsible for me being an outcast. You drove me away from home, and forced me to come here. I will not forget it, and some day I shall square accounts. *Look out for me!* It will not be well if we meet. NODDY NIXON."

"Well, I like his nerve!" said Jerry, after he had read the letter over a second time. "As if we made him take that money. Look here!" he called to Ned and Bob, showing them the letter.

They were much surprised at the veiled threats contained in the missive.

"I wonder what he thinks he can do to us?" asked Ned.

"How does he come to be in New York?" asked Bob.

"He probably went there in his father's — I mean in his own — automobile," said Jerry. "That isn't much of a trip for a big car."

"Well, I guess we will not let the letter worry us," went on Bob.

"I wonder if when we happen to be touring the west we will meet with Noddy?" said Ned, presently.

"And I wonder if he'd really try to do anything to us," put in Bob.

"Don't talk about it," said Jerry. "We are comfortable now, don't worry about the future."

And then the three chums went home, to wait as patiently as possible for the automobile to arrive. They did not know what was ahead of them, but, as Jerry said, what was the use of borrowing trouble? The future looked rosy indeed.

THE END.

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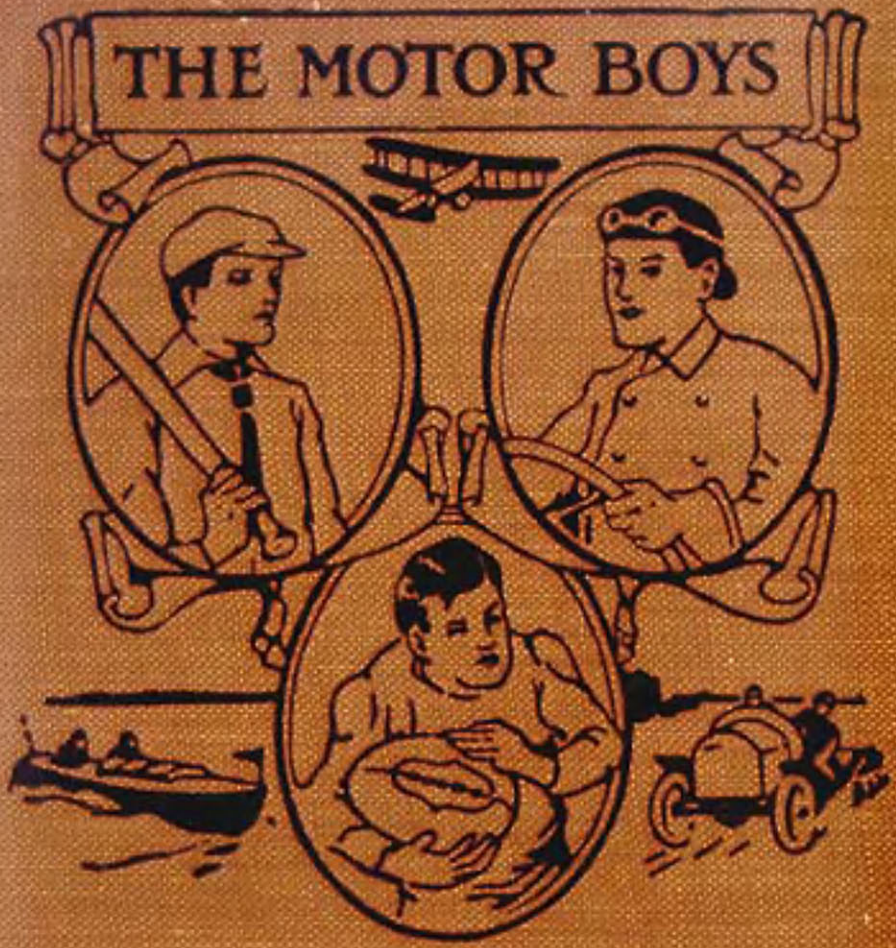

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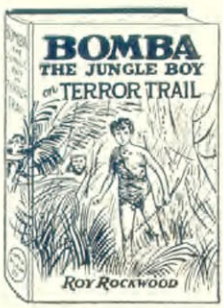

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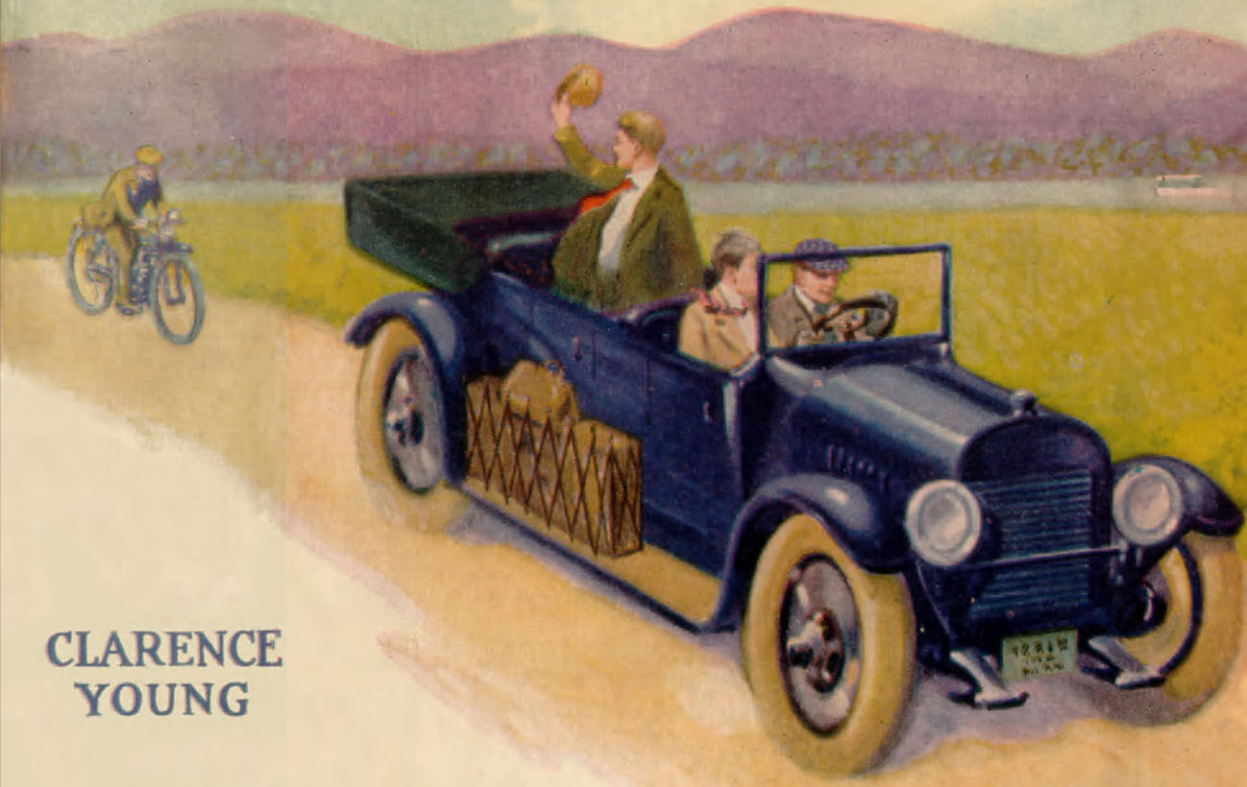

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